1989

Cambodian refugees in California : after the holocaust

Usha, 1948- Welaratna
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses

Recommended Citation

Welaratna, Usha, 1948-, "Cambodian refugees in California : after the holocaust" (1989). *Master's Theses*. 3119.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.z3es-j5f9>

https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/3119

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

INFORMATION TO USERS

The most advanced technology has been used to photograph and reproduce this manuscript from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book. These are also available as one exposure on a standard 35mm slide or as a 17" x 23" black and white photographic print for an additional charge.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

U·M·I

University Microfilms International
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

Order Number 1337853

Cambodian refugees in California: After the holocaust

Welaratna, Usha, M.A.

San Jose State University, 1989

Copyright ©1989 by Welaratna, Usha. All rights reserved.

U·M·I

300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

CAMBODIAN REFUGEES IN CALIFORNIA: AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

A Thesis

Presented to

The Office of Graduate Studies and Research

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master Of Arts

By

Usha Welaratna

May, 1989

APPROVED FOR THE OFFICE OF
GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

Dr. James M. Freeman
Department of Anthropology
and Cybernetic Systems

Dr. Mira Zussman
Department of Anthropology
and Cybernetic Systems

Dr. Denise Murray
Linguistics Program

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

Copyright (C) 1989 Usha Welaratna.

All Rights Reserved.

ABSTRACT

CAMBODIAN REFUGEES IN CALIFORNIA: AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

by Usha Welaratna

This thesis, based on participant observations, interviews with Americans and Cambodians, and six life histories of Cambodian refugees, documents the refugees' lives in their homeland, the effects of the Khmer Rouge holocaust on them and their families, their flight from Cambodia, and their adjustments in the United States.

Perspectives used are both American and Cambodian. American service providers and teachers typically emphasize refugee training for economic self-sufficiency and assimilation to mainstream American values. Cambodian views of successful adjustment emphasize cooperation, non-aggression, psychological fulfillment, and jobs that emphasize social service. Cambodian needs for adjustment often are not met by American designed programs, while American expectations for refugee adjustment often are not met by Cambodians. What is needed are programs that consider refugee needs while providing them with necessary skills for survival in America. This thesis provides examples of, and recommendations on, how to do this.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The past two years I spent conducting this study have been most exciting and rewarding, and it is with much gratitude that I thank Look Tha, Nya Srey, Pu Ma, Bopha, Mum, and Koun Srey for their friendship and trust. I also thank Sovan Boun Thuy and the Cambodian community for accepting me without reservation.

I am grateful to Dr. Richard Keady, Dr. James M. Freeman, and Dr. Mira Zussman for giving me the opportunity to pursue graduate studies, and the San Jose State University Foundation for partially funding my research.

I thank my thesis committee for their support and guidance. Dr. Denise Murray's critical evaluations helped to improve this thesis in many ways. I will always be grateful to Dr. Mira Zussman for the personal interest she took in my progress, and for her valuable advice. She showed me new ways of approaching my study and analyzing my findings. Dr. James Freeman, my major advisor, exceeded my expectations of a teacher in every way. While he was always available with guidance and support when I needed him, he allowed me the freedom to seek knowledge at my own pace. His insight and understanding of diverse cultures provided inspiration and new perspectives, and set the

goals for accomplishment. His generosity and compassion made the accomplishment possible.

All of the above experiences and achievements were possible only because of the generosity of my husband, Ramya. I would not have returned to the academic world if not for his wisdom, and I would not have remained there without his help and cooperation. I also acknowledge with gratitude and pride, the understanding and encouragement given to me by my children, Ruwan, Sumudu, and Deepthi. During the past two years the assistance I received from them ranged from Ruwan's computer expertise to Sumudu's and Deepthi's household managerial expertise, without which I could not have accomplished my goals. I thank them very much.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the problem	
PART I. BACKGROUND	
2. FIELD METHODS AND SURVEY OF LITERATURE.....	8
PART II. HISTORY SOCIETY AND CULTURE	
3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: PRE-HISTORY THROUGH LON NOL.....	32
Pre-History	
Indianization	
The Angkor Period	
Decline of Cambodia	
Arrival of the French in Cambodia	
Cambodia Under the French	
Development of Cambodian Nationalism and Independence	
The Sihanouk Era	
The Lon Nol Era	
4. THE KHMER ROUGE REGIME: IMPACTS ON SOCIETY.....	66
Cambodian Society Before the Khmer Rouge Regime	
Education	

Khmer Language

Buddhism as a Way of Life

Buddhism and Cambodian Folk Beliefs

The Khmer Rouge Holocaust, its Victims,
and the Survivors

PART III. THE NARRATORS

5. MUM..... 86
- Early Years
 - The Khmer Rouge Experience
 - Escape to Thailand and Return to Hell
 - Second Escape to Thailand
 - Life in Refugee Camps
 - Arrival in America
 - Love and Marriage
 - Reflections, Perceptions, Adjustments
6. NYA SREY..... 140
- Early Years
 - Love and Marriage
 - The Khmer Rouge Experience
 - Arrival in America
 - Reflections, Perceptions, Adjustments
7. LOOK THA..... 169
- Early Years
 - Love and Marriage
 - The Khmer Rouge Experience
 - Escape to Thailand

	Life in Refugee Camp	
	Arrival in America	
	Reflections, Perceptions, Adjustments	
8.	PU MA.....	209
	Early Years	
	Love and Marriage	
	The Khmer Rouge Experience	
	Escape to Thailand	
	Life in Refugee Camps	
	Arrival in America	
	Reflections, Perceptions, Adjustments	
9.	KOUN SREY.....	236
	Early Years	
	The Khmer Rouge Experience	
	Escape to Thailand	
	Life in Refugee Camps	
	Arrival in America	
	Reflections, Perceptions, Adjustments	
10.	BOPHA.....	251
	Early Years	
	The Khmer Rouge Experience	
	A Refugee in Vietnam	
	Escape to Thailand	
	Life in Refugee Camps	
	Arrival in America	

Love and Marriage

Reflections, Perceptions, Adjustments

PART IV. INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

11. AMERICAN VIEWS OF CAMBODIAN REFUGEE
ADJUSTMENTS..... 288
12. CAMBODIAN VIEWS OF ADJUSTMENTS..... 303
13. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS..... 337

Cambodian Barriers to Adjustments in the
United States

United States Barriers to Cambodian
Refugee Adjustments

Recommendations

APPENDIX

- SAMPLES FROM NARRATIVES..... 345
- BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 351

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

On April 17, 1975, after five years of devastation and upheaval caused by war, the small Southeast Asian nation of Cambodia welcomed the victorious communist Khmer Rouge regime led by Pol Pot, to lead their country to peace and prosperity. To the surprise of many Cambodians or the Khmer, Pol Pot closed the doors of their country to the outside world for the next three years and eight months while the new regime initiated a social, cultural, and economic revolution to create a new egalitarian, self-sufficient nation. In January 1979, Vietnamese communists invaded Cambodia and defeated their enemies, the Khmer Rouge. It was then that the world first learned that during the revolution Pol Pot's regime had turned the country into one of the most horrifying prison camps ever known. Of an estimated 7 million people, 1 to 3 million, mostly the wealthy and the educated, had been killed or died because of starvation and sickness in an autogenocidal holocaust. After the Vietnamese liberation, thousands of starved, tortured, and abused survivors of the Khmer Rouge,

fearful of continuing war and a new communist regime, fled their homeland amid great risks in search of refuge in any country that would take them. Since 1979, America has received approximately 140,000 Khmer refugees, of whom about 100,000 have been accepted by California. About 3,500 refugees have settled in Santa Clara County.

This thesis documents the life stories of six Cambodian refugees who reside in Santa Clara County. The narrators, whose real names and places of residence have been changed for their protection, relate their memories and experiences of life in Cambodia before the revolution and during the holocaust, and their experiences and their views of adjustments as refugees in America.

When Khmer refugees first arrived in the United States they were part of a large influx of other Southeast Asian refugees from Vietnam and Laos, who also sought refuge here when their countries fell to the communists after the withdrawal of American forces. Although America was partly responsible for the destruction of Cambodia (Shawcross 1979, 24-26, Senator Solarz 20/20 TV Program January 8, 1989), refugee resettlement workers and the American public in general were largely unaware of Cambodia as a nation.

The Khmer had a culture and history that was distinctly different from that of other Southeast Asian

refugees. Because refugee service providers knew little about Southeast Asian refugees, at first they treated the Cambodians as a homogeneous part of the Southeast Asian refugee group. This misunderstanding resulted in much hardship for Khmer refugees, particularly because the Khmer and the Vietnamese had a long history of enmity and distrust. The problem was compounded because (1) the Khmer themselves had no knowledge of English, and so could not communicate their needs, and (2) they did not have a group of people who had already emigrated from their country and settled here, a group who could have provided a support service to the newly arrived refugees. These problems were not unique to Khmer refugees. For instance, Vietnamese refugees also faced similar problems when they first arrived here. But the Khmer were less educated and had been less exposed to western behavior and beliefs than the Vietnamese, prior to their arrival here.

Even though recent studies of different Southeast Asian refugee groups have described their different ethnic, historical, cultural, and religious backgrounds, the practice of comparing the Khmer with the Vietnamese in particular has continued over the years. This causes problems for the Khmer who have a distinctly different social system and world view. Furthermore, observations made about Cambodians by refugee service providers and

other researchers have generally reflected an American perspective. Refugee service policies affecting the Khmer are formulated on the basis of these studies, which do not consider the Khmer refugees' needs or their perspectives. Today, Khmer refugees are generally viewed as a group who have failed to gain economic self-sufficiency, or to have adjusted successfully to American society.

As an immigrant from South Asia to the West, I have been acutely aware of the connections between my past experiences and my present life in the West, and how these experiences have influenced my adjustments to western culture and society. Therefore, my main contention in this study is that, to understand the Khmer refugees and their adjustments to the United States, it is essential to look at their lives as a whole, and to consider their adjustments not only from American perspectives, but also from Cambodian perspectives.

To uncover the Cambodian perspectives, I collected life histories using ethnographic field methods, and attempted to "grasp the native's (in this case, Khmer refugee's) point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world" (Malinowski 1922, 25). Thus, these narratives contain an emic, or insider's view of adjustments to the United States. The narrators recall their childhoods and family life in Cambodia, and the

horrors of the Khmer Rouge holocaust. They talk about their escape from the country, and their experiences as refugees, first in Thai refugee camps, and now, in the United States. They express their views of life in general, and their hopes and fears about the future. Finally, they critically analyze their adjustments as refugees in America.

I determined American views of Cambodian refugee adjustments through personal interviews and from other research studies. I have also attempted to present an etic (outsider's) view of the refugees' adjustments. From this view, the following questions are addressed: To what extent do historical and cultural traditions of the Khmer people influence their adjustments to the United States? To what extent do Khmer-Vietnamese conflicts from Indochina continue to affect refugees here? Does the Theravada Buddhist worldview influence their adjustments? Is there a conflict in shifting from a cooperative society in Cambodia to a competitive one in the United States? Are there differences in the structures of Khmer and English as mediums of thought and communication? Finally, do the memories and recollections refugees have of their lives in Cambodia affect their adjustments to the United States?

By looking at the refugees' lives as a whole, and by presenting both Cambodian and American perspectives on

Cambodian refugee adjustments, I intend to demonstrate that either perspective alone is insufficient to understand the Cambodian refugee experience; a holistic view of their lives is essential to grasp the significance of Cambodian refugee adjustments.

PART I
BACKGROUND

CHAPTER 2

FIELD METHODS AND SURVEY OF LITERATURE

In conducting the ethnographic study of Khmer refugees presented in this thesis, I used life history collection and participant observation methods, in the style of ethnographic work described by Marcus and Fisher:

As an ethnographer, the anthropologist focuses his efforts on a different sort of holism: not to make universally valid statements, but to represent a particular way of life as fully as possible. . . . The essence of holistic representation in modern ethnography has not been to produce a catalog or an encyclopedia (although the classic assumption supporting the authority of the ethnographic writer is that he commands this sort of background knowledge), but to contextualize elements of culture and to make systematic connections among them (Marcus and Fisher 1986, 22-23).

I also tried to incorporate three other important components: "Knowledge," "Compassion," and "Involvement." In his article on these three components, Dr. Freeman, professor of Anthropology at SJSU (and my major advisor on this project) writes,

Knowledge is not simply the accumulation of information but rather the formulation of a perspective developed for a purpose, which enables a person to seize the moment, recognize the significance of questions when they emerge or of gaps in understanding when they occur, but above all, to recognize needs that must be met. . . .

If compassion is made part of the project, then the distinction between observer and subject becomes

blurred. It has already been blurred by our recognition that in the case of life histories, we are not so much studying a phenomenon as we are involved in its very creation. From both the epistemological and the moral angle, we are an inseparable part of the phenomenon we study. . . .

What activates a project is knowledgeable, compassionate involvement. Without it, a project is lifeless, inert. Involvement is not always safe; it often requires taking chances, whether they be social commitments, personal judgments, or the development of new perspectives. Finally, knowledge, compassion, and involvement are not isolated entities but are linked to form a coherent whole. If one element is missing, the whole enterprise fails. This becomes clear in the life history projects. They could not function, or meet the needs of people in the way they do, without the connection of all three components (Freeman 1984, 28-29).

The anthropological perspectives and methods derived from Marcus and Fisher (1986), Spradley (1979, 1980), and Clifford and Marcus (1986) enabled me to conduct my research smoothly and successfully. But my application of Dr. Freeman's concepts of knowledge, compassion, and involvement made my work with Khmer refugees more meaningful, mutually beneficial, and satisfying, and helped to build mutual confidence and trust that gave the whole study a much larger dimension than it otherwise would have had.

Since much of my field work was also influenced by literature available on Khmer and other Southeast Asian peoples, both as natives of their countries and as refugees in America, this chapter contains both a discussion of field methods used and a survey of relevant literature.

The survey of literature contains only those works specially selected for their usefulness with regard to this study, while the bibliography lists all the works consulted.

When I first met Dr. Freeman to discuss a possible topic of research, the subject of refugees was the farthest thing from my mind. I had been teaching English to speakers of other languages, and my interest was primarily in that area. I approached Dr. Freeman with the idea of looking mainly into cultural problems which affected the English language learning of my students who came to the United States as immigrants, not refugees. Although he did not dissuade me from going ahead with my proposed work, Dr. Freeman put forward another idea: working with refugees, who also needed assistance. He suggested many groups of refugees both from Southeast Asia and from other parts of the world. I considered the suggestion, as well as the groups of people, and decided on the Khmer because they, like me, were Asian people from a Theravada Buddhist background. Since this was the first study of this nature I was undertaking, I felt it would be helpful to have some knowledge, some common elements, that would help me to understand better a group of people I would be working with very closely. I also felt this understanding would enable me to represent the Cambodian perspective in a way that

would allow an outside reader to have some empathy with these refugees. My aim was not to advocate their worldview or life style, but rather, to convey from their perspective, why they make the decisions they do.

When I started this study I was aware of the location of Cambodia on the map, the name of its capital city, and that Cambodia and Sri Lanka had Buddhist connections. But I knew nothing about the country or its people. My knowledge about the Pol Pot holocaust too was minimal.

On May 18, 1987, Dr. Freeman introduced me to a Khmer community leader, who was to be my primary contact in the community. Although she spoke English well and was employed, she confirmed that many Khmer refugees had not adjusted well to America, and had not acquired English language skills successfully, which prevented them from finding jobs. I decided to teach English to the refugees. Not only would my teaching English to refugees benefit them, it would also provide me a means of becoming more involved with them, and therefore more knowledgeable about them. However, I also felt that since the majority of the refugees knew little English, I would have to learn Khmer, the language of the Cambodian people, both for the enhancement of my relationship with my subjects, and for research purposes.

I spent the months of June, July, and August of 1987

reading about Cambodia and Cambodians as refugees, learning Khmer, meeting Cambodia scholars both through personal appointments and at a conference on Southeast Asian refugees, and interviewing people in local schools and organizations who dealt with Khmer refugees. I had no pre-formed opinions at the time either about the refugees or the people who dealt with them. I merely collected information, which provided both positive and negative views of the refugees.

For my language learning, I obtained Modern Spoken Cambodian and accompanying audio tapes (Huffman 1970). The lessons provide a command of the basic structures of standard spoken Cambodian, the dialect taught in schools and used for mass communication. This book analyses the Khmer language and shows the differences between English and Khmer. The language course in this book is designed to be learned with a native speaker, and after I had become familiar with the phonetics, the community leader introduced me to a man she considered a good teacher. I visited him twice a week, and his Khmer neighbors often invited me to their homes. I also frequently spoke to Cambodians I met on the street. So initially, both my language skills and my acquaintance with the community developed almost without a conscious effort, but after three months my lessons were interrupted when the teacher

moved to a new location.

I found also that once I began teaching English, I had little opportunity to speak in Khmer since the people were more anxious to learn English. Later, I found Look Tha, whose narrative appears in Chapter 7, who agreed to teach me Khmer in return for English lessons. He was sixty-two years old, and had little to do other than help his wife take care of their grandchildren. Even with this ideal arrangement, I achieved only moderate competence in Khmer. I had underestimated the effort and time commitment necessary for language learning. Eventually I did what I have recommended in my findings regarding ESL lessons for the refugees: I set aside textbook lessons for later use, and learned what I needed for my research purposes. This approach enabled me to collect life histories without the regular assistance of an interpreter. Although the refugees tried to narrate their stories in English to improve their speaking skills, they often had to revert to Khmer. When my command of the Khmer language was insufficient for me to understand what was being said, I wrote down and tape recorded the words and phrases and sought the assistance of another refugee who was more fluent in English.

With regard to the language learning problems of the Khmer refugees, Brick and Louie (1984) emphasize the

cultural barriers as well as linguistic and cognitive barriers facing Khmer refugees attempting to learn English.

My search for historical studies on Cambodia revealed that though much has been written on what the refugees describe as the "glorious" Angkor period and the "inglorious" Pol Pot period, relatively few sources are available that provide a comprehensive history of the country. Chandler (1983) provides the most comprehensive historical study of that country. While this work chronicles Cambodia's history from its beginnings to the twentieth century, it also attempts to put forth a Cambodian perspective. Chandler's book contributed greatly to my understanding of how ancient historical events of Cambodia shaped the lives and minds of the Khmer people. Grant (1971) provides an in-depth look at Sihanouk's and Lon Nol's political ideas and regimes, the escalation of America's conflict with Asia, and the spread of hostilities into Cambodia. Hall (1955) gave me a comprehensive historical overview of Southeast Asia.

Ebihara (1971) provides the first detailed anthropological study of a pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodian village. Not only does Ebihara present an intimate look at various aspects of peasant and village life, such as life cycle events, family and kinship organization, residence patterns, religious outlook, community relations, and

agricultural methods, she also integrates these various aspects of the nation as a whole, as the context within which the village operates. Chhim (1987) gives a concise but insightful emic view of Cambodian history, her physical features, culture, and society.

Ngor (1987) documents the transformation of his life from a village youth to a doctor trained in western medical techniques, his tragic experiences as a victim of Pol Pot's holocaust, and his fellow people's adjustments to America as refugees. Yathay (1987), May (1986), Szymusiak (1986), and Criddle (1987) highlight the pain of family disruptions.

Although both the narrators in my study and the writers mentioned above came from widely dispersed regions of Cambodia, they shared a common worldview and similar cultural traditions. Perhaps the only exception to this homogeneity were the peasants in the outer regions of the country.

The emic or insider's views presented in the above works illustrated clearly for me, my own distinctive relationship to my subjects, as a person coming from an Indianized cultural and religious background, but from a different ethnic background. For instance, I learned that Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia is based on the doctrines I was familiar with in Sri Lanka, and that cultural elements

of respect for the monks were the same in both societies. But I also realized that Buddhism in Cambodia is deeply intertwined with folk religious beliefs about ghosts in a manner that is not present in Sri Lanka. The knowledge I gained from reading, however, was not sufficient to crystallize for me just how much of an insider and an outsider I was in the Khmer community. I understood this only through involvement, when I started participant observation of Khmer refugees. Spradley describes the distinctive contributions that participant observation makes in grasping the meaning of culture:

The essential core of ethnography is this concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand. Some of these meanings are directly expressed in language; many are taken for granted and communicated only through word and action. But in every society people make constant use of these complex meaning systems to organize their behavior, to understand themselves and others, and to make sense out of the world in which they live (Spradley 1980, 5).

In the Khmer community, as in the Sri Lankan community, religious events give the community a way to understand the world. As a Theravada Buddhist, I knew the meanings of many events and actions that may be misinterpreted by non-Buddhists. For example, when the refugees place their foreheads on the ground and pay their respect to the Sangha or the monks (an action that is sometimes seen by non-Buddhists as displaying subservience), they pay respect to the Sangha not as

individuals, but as both teachers and exemplars of Buddhist doctrines and the Buddhist way of life. When I paid respect to the Sangha in the same manner, the Khmer immediately made me one of their community, or an insider. But because Cambodian folk beliefs are so intertwined with their Buddhist practices, I was a complete outsider when it came to certain important customs like transferring merit to the dead (see chapter 4). Although both the Khmer and the Sri Lankans transfer merit, they do it quite differently. Sri Lankans hand over their offerings to the Sangha in memory of their dead relatives and friends at the end of an alms giving ceremony. Because of the Khmer belief in kmauit or ghosts (see chapter 4), I found their transference of merit involved very different meanings and actions. Before handing over the donations, the Khmer first explicitly display their donations by placing them on a tray and walking about outside so that any wandering kmauit may see them and be consoled. Only afterwards do they donate the items to the monks. The first time I saw this event, I had no understanding of its significance, even though I knew about the Khmer belief in kmauit from my readings. Only by involving myself actively through participant observation did I grasp the application of these beliefs in the refugees' lives. Although I have no belief in kmauit, I understood the meaning of their actions

and was able to have compassion for them. Even more importantly, from the life histories collected, I now realize the connections between Pol Pot's holocaust and the folk beliefs about the kmauit, and the significance these folk beliefs may have on the refugees' mental health (see chapter 12).

In looking at Pol Pot's murderous revolution, I was interested not only in the revolution itself, but also in the political and social conditions leading to it. While Grant (1971) explains the Southeast Asian political climate at the time, Burchett (1981) places Cambodian politics in a more global perspective. According to Burchett, Cambodia was (and still is) the pawn in the midst of the power struggle between America, China and other powerful nations. Kiernan and Boua (1982) provide information on the social conditions of Cambodia at this time. The sections on the peasantry and the Sihanouk era verify accounts of narrators regarding their former social status, and the effect of Sihanouk's politics on their lives.

Vickery (1984) also examines the social conditions in Cambodia during this era, and suggests that some Khmer Rouge cadre were peasants who came from the outskirts of the country that were not a part of "the region of happy, Buddhist, rice-growing peasants of conventional-wisdom Cambodia." Narrators Look Tha and Nya Srey confirm this.

The refugees I interviewed belonged to the 'conventional-wisdom Cambodia' (see chapter 4). Vickery's book, though valuable for its historical and social information, nevertheless presents a disturbing bias. Vickery attempts to justify the Khmer Rouge actions of genocide and forced labor on the grounds that city dwellers were said to have exploited these peasants. He also dismisses the refugees as mere fortune hunters. It is evident from sources cited in my study that as time went on, the Pol Pot regime did not discriminate based on the victims' class, race, or religion; even if they had, their gratuitous actions cannot be justified on any grounds. Furthermore, the narratives contained here and elsewhere confirm that the victims of the revolution sought refuge not because they wanted fortune, but because they wanted safety and freedom from murder and oppression.

Shawcross (1979) brings to light America's role in the Cambodian tragedy by examining the Nixon administration's involvement in Cambodia, and how the administration's actions contributed to the rise of the Khmer Rouge regime. This book leaves the impression that even if not for humanitarian reasons, the United States owes Cambodian refugees a safe home simply out of moral obligation since this country contributed significantly to the destruction of Cambodia.

Regarding the Pol Pot regime, Stuart-Fox and Ung (1985) analyze the mind set of the Khmer Rouge leaders and attempt to understand the thinking and worldview which were responsible for the policy decision of the regime. In addition, it chronicles Ung's experiences under the regime, illustrated with cartoons drawn by him. The immense suffering and losses of the victims of the revolution are documented by the narrators of this study and in the biographical works mentioned earlier.

Hearing of and reading about such atrocities left me emotionally drained for days, and I even suffered nightmares myself. They also taught me the value of human life and the far reaching consequences of my own actions towards others. This was particularly significant because of the nature of my field methods, collection of life histories. I became more and more aware that my probing for information might trigger painful memories for my subjects, resulting in adverse effects. Moral problems of this nature are of course an integral part of ethnographic work, and have been addressed by professionals such as Spradley, who gives the following Principle of Professional Responsibility.

In research, an anthropologist's paramount responsibility is to those he studies. When there is a conflict of interest, these individuals must come first. The anthropologist must do everything within his power to protect their physical, social, and psychological welfare and to honor their dignity and

privacy. (Spradley 1980, 21).

Freeman extends the notion of responsibility beyond the protection of subjects. He asserts that

A project should provide some material, social, spiritual, or psychological benefit to those who are participants. . . . From both the epistemological and the moral angle, we are an inseparable part of the phenomenon we study. Such a recognition may help us to avoid the extremes of patronizing people or ripping them off. The key is to treat people with dignity.

Bearing these words in mind, I started collecting life histories. Before I started recording narratives, I developed a consent form describing the nature of my project and possible benefits and risks to participants, in compliance with the University's protection of human subjects requirements. This form was translated into Khmer and given to all participants after they expressed some willingness to work with me. Before they started their narratives, however, I instructed them to read the agreement in my presence, and together we went over each sentence and phrase. The narrators retained the right to withdraw from the agreement at any stage of their narration, to add or delete information, and to make any changes they felt necessary, but I did the final editing of the narratives. In editing, my main concern was not to correct English language mistakes appearing in the narratives, but to present examples of how Cambodians speak English when they do not know the language well. Samples

of each narrator's original narrative appear in the appendix. Because the original narratives are virtually unintelligible to the English reader unfamiliar with Cambodian English, I rewrote every narrative in a modified version of Cambodian English. Nevertheless, I attempted to retain original words, phrases, and grammatical features, such as topic-comment sentence structures, to convey linguistic differences between Khmer and English, and to reflect the Khmer story telling manner as best as I could.

The agreements were signed only after the narrators had read their stories as they appear in this study. A copy of the agreement signed by the participant and me, and a copy of his or her narrative have been given to each narrator. One of the biggest benefits the narrators saw in agreeing to be research subjects was that they would acquire a copy of their life stories, which they could pass to their descendants.

The narrators were not selected randomly, but from personal acquaintance and through recommendations by other people in the community. The vast majority of Khmer refugees came from rural backgrounds, and I have attempted to give a comprehensive view of rural Khmer life styles in this thesis. But I deliberately chose subjects from varying ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds to discover if the Khmer had a relatively homogeneous cultural

outlook as was popularly believed by other writers. While three of my subjects are of peasant origin, the other three are of urban origin. Although I had some basic questions ready, I chose not to use a prepared questionnaire. My questions were open ended. Mandelbaum says, "Life histories emphasize the experiences and requirements of the individual--how the person copes with society rather than how society copes with the stream of individuals" (Mandelbaum 1973, 177). While I allowed the narrators to generally emphasize their experiences and requirements, I also directed their narratives by asking particular questions to obtain perspectives that answered the questions I had set out to research. Hence, even though I had originally planned to collect life histories, I ended up with a narrative that had some life history elements, and some elements which were obtained through a definite interview process. A good example is the last section of each narrative entitled "Reflections, Perceptions, Adjustments." To that extent, these life histories meet not only the narrators' requirements, but mine as well: my etic views are an inseparable part of the study.

I met all the informants in their homes with the exception of Bopha, whom I met at various locations. Of the six informants, three agreed to let me use a tape recorder, but even when I recorded, I made extensive hand

written notes because pronunciation problems of certain sounds and words made the transcribing of the tapes difficult. Collecting Look Tha's, Pu Ma's, and Koun Srey's narratives was especially difficult due to language and pronunciation problems.

Look Tha was my first narrator. I had known him for two months as my Khmer language teacher, and because of his traditional outlook, I asked him if he would like to become a research subject. But as we proceeded with his narrative, I sensed he was not keen to recount the Pol Pot crimes in detail, although he never said so directly. Instead, when I questioned him about that experience, he would tell me that his English was not good enough. When I asked him to tell me in Khmer, his reply was that my Khmer was not good enough. Despite my knowledge of the regime's atrocities and my awareness of the painful memories such atrocities might cause the survivors, I felt disappointed at his reticence. Even worse, Look Tha was my first informant, and I began to worry that I might not get any information on this aspect of the refugees' lives from any of the subjects. At the time, I saw the Pol Pot experience as the most important part of their lives, and as the factor that would make my study attractive to others, but Look Tha did not want to recount it. I had to make a decision about whose interest should come first, and in

looking back, I feel I faced the biggest test in my ability to act ethically and responsibly at that instance. I examined the reasons for Look Tha's reticence. Probably the most important was the acute pain and suffering Look Tha must have felt at the memory of all that happened to him and his people. However, I also felt that he was ashamed to admit that his people committed such atrocities against their own kind, and also against him, as a human being, a former monk, and an elder. I knew from the knowledge I had acquired about the pre-Pol Pot Khmer culture that as Buddhists, Khmer people valued human life above everything else, and that they respected the wisdom that comes with age. My involvement in the refugee community had shown me that Look Tha was shown that respect as an elder. But the Khmer Rouge soldiers who were sometimes mere children of twelve or thirteen, displayed the utmost contempt for every cultural norm that existed before, including respect for elders. As a former monk, Look Tha displayed much discipline and dignity, and the Khmer Rouge regime's gratuitous actions and lack of respect would have caused him, in addition to every other pain, the loss of dignity as well. If I were to press him for information, I would not be providing him with any material, social, spiritual, or psychological benefit, but rather, be harming him. Compassion had to come before

knowledge; by recognizing this, I was able to preserve his honor and dignity. In return I earned his respect and trust. I gathered from him other information needed for my study, about Khmer culture, traditions, and Buddhism. The recounting of these gave him immense pleasure, and therefore provided him spiritual and psychological benefits. Eventually, he did mention some events from the Pol Pot era when he chose to do so, without any coercion from me. And I need not have worried: out of the six narrators, only Nya Srey refused to talk about the Khmer Rouge experience in detail, but she, unlike Look Tha, stated that very clearly.

Even without minute details about the suffering under Pol Pot, every story with its loss of life (not only human, but also cultural, social, and family), caused both the narrators and myself a great deal of emotional strain, and there were many moments when I had to stop simply because the pain was too much, especially for the narrators. Out of all the narratives, I found Pu Ma's and Mum's the hardest to listen to. They were so tragic, yet neither Pu Ma nor Mum displayed anger at the crimes committed against them and their loved ones. Mostly there was immense sorrow, occasionally punctuated by laughter when they talked of happier times before Pol Pot. When recounting the Khmer Rouge atrocities, their facial expressions and

tones displayed amazement and disbelief, and later, became questioning, trying to find answers to unanswered questions. This absence of anger made their stories even more poignant; they also filled me with sorrow and anger--that such innocent people should have been so viciously violated, and are now forced to search for refuge in strange lands, beginning with their hazardous escapes to Thailand.

Writing about the Khmer refugees in Thai refugee camps, Shawcross (1984) examines how people whose lives have not been disrupted by war and persecution, do or do not relate to those incarcerated and often murdered in genocides. He also evaluates the work of some of the humanitarian organizations created to deal with such problems, and the world's response to the Cambodian famine and the refugees themselves. Loescher and Scanlan (1986) provide a critical look at how American refugee policies are governed by political interests rather than humanitarian concerns.

Haines (1985) gives an overview of the refugee problem here. Ebihara's article on the Khmer in this book provides a specific picture of problems faced by the Cambodians in adjusting to the United States due to cultural conflicts between the two social structures. Owen (1985) provides an in-depth look at the mental health

problems and needs that are peculiar to Southeast Asians. Various contributors describe how to modify health services taking into consideration the ethnic backgrounds of the people served, develop prevention efforts to forestall psychological problems, and conduct preventive intervention research.

With regard to studies done on Southeast Asian refugees, Bousquet (1988) claims that social science research on refugees is often directed to conform to the needs and regulations of government and other funding organizations. She suggests that "the concept of 'assimilation' is the object of scientific discourse. . . (and) social scientists are imposing their own American values" in judging the process of refugee assimilation (Bousquet 1988, 1). Yu and Lui point out that ". . . the choice of research topic itself is defined by those who wish to take some actions on the refugees who have no power to defend themselves" (Yu and Lui 1986, 498). In Chapter 11 I have presented theories of Khmer refugee adjustment as stated both by personnel working with the refugees and other researchers; these confirm the claims of Bousquet and Yu and Lui. I have primarily concentrated on work done by social scientists in the University of San Diego, because their work, also done in the State of California, is recognized by those dealing with Khmer refugees and by the

Office of Refugee Resettlement in Washington.

Refugee service personnel and researchers whose observations I have presented in Chapter 11 have based their expectations and analysis of Khmer refugee adjustment more on the needs and perspectives of the federal government and on American ideals. By contrast, my study and analysis have been based on Khmer refugee needs and ideals and the ways in which these influence their adjustment to the United States. While statistical data such as those resulting from studies cited in Chapter 11 are useful for understanding Khmer performance as a group compared with other Southeast Asian refugee groups, they do not contribute much to the understanding of the Khmer as individuals. This is because the research trends, based on American perspectives, have not given the refugees an opportunity to present their own views or perspectives. Studies implicitly or explicitly promoting American perspectives also fail to provide a body of literature which will portray, for future generations of Khmer people here, an understanding of their roots and culture.

Without understanding the Khmer perspective, it is unfair to make judgments about them as a group of people, and the success or failure of their adjustment to the United States. In my study, I have attempted to fill the gap of a Khmer perspective in existing work on the

adjustment of Khmer refugees by portraying an intimate and in-depth view of the Khmer refugees as individuals. I also hope that this study will provide future generations of Khmer children with some knowledge of their ancestors. I hope I have succeeded in meeting my goal of presenting the Khmer perspective of life, which will contribute to a better understanding of Khmer refugees, and therefore, a more beneficial adjustment process both for the American public and the refugees themselves. If I have, my success is largely because I conducted my work with knowledge, compassion, and involvement.

PART II

HISTORY, SOCIETY, AND CULTURE

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: PRE-HISTORY THROUGH LON NOL

Pre-History

Many elements of contemporary Cambodian society appear to have ancient origins. Human skulls and bones found in the eastern region suggest that pre-historic Cambodians around 1500 B.C. resembled their descendants of the present day, after allowing for recent mixing with Chinese and Vietnamese blood. Pots found in a cave in the Northwestern part of the country show that methods of pottery production have continued for perhaps 6000 years. It is also believed that by the beginning of the Christian era, inhabitants of Cambodia spoke languages related to present day Cambodian, or Khmer. Other similarities between early and present day Cambodians can be seen in their consumption of large amounts of fish, pile dwellings, domestication of pigs and buffalo, slash and burn cultivation, animistic beliefs and ancestor worship, village games played at lunar new year, and the custom of chewing betel.

This thread of continuity runs through many aspects of Cambodian history until the drastic changes wrought in

1975. Although continuity does not mean that Cambodians are averse to change, it has been an important element in their adjustment to new social and cultural ideas through the centuries.

Indianization

The first major transformations came at the beginning of the Christian era when Indian culture and thought spread into Cambodia. India never colonized Cambodia, and Indian influences were never imposed by force. 'Indianization' spread through exchange of ideas via traders and travelers between the two countries. But the significance of Indian influences was such that the earliest known 'Tribal culture' kingdoms in the region, Funan and Chenla, founded around A.D. 1 and built on egalitarian principles, were replaced by a monarchic system from India. The Indian system, with a central government under a supreme monarch, changed the earlier horizontal social system to a vertical one with a strict social hierarchy. Cambodia also acquired from India a vocabulary for a social hierarchy, a system of codified law, a writing system, meters for poetry, a pantheon, Theravada Buddhism, architecture, iconography, and astronomy. Though changes continued for over a thousand years, the Khmer did not embrace every aspect of Indian culture. For instance, the caste system which is a distinct feature of Indian social structure never became a

part of Khmer society even though the egalitarian society was replaced by a hierarchical one with occupational and urban/rural distinctions. Thus the Khmer seem to have developed their own distinctive culture by choosing only those aspects they wanted from the Indian model.

Early Cambodian kingdoms also traded and had diplomatic relations with China, the other great power at this time. A number of Khmer dynasties paid token tributes to Chinese rulers and there was some Chinese cultural influence on Cambodian art and certain forms of dress. However, Cambodia remained essentially Indianized rather than Sinicized. In fact, this Indianization was so pervasive that the structure and worldview it provided united the society and gave it a national identity till recent times. Moreover, since Indianization was not imposed by force, it did not produce the identity crisis among Cambodians that Sinicization produced among the Vietnamese (Chandler 1983, 12).

The Angkor Period

From the beginning of A.D. 9 to about A.D. 15, Cambodia ascended to a period of political and cultural brilliance known as the Angkor period. The country, known as Kambujadesa at this time, was the mightiest kingdom in Southeast Asia spreading over parts of today's Thailand,

Vietnam, Laos, and Burma. The empire was founded by King Jayavarman II, considered a Devaraja or God King (the earthly incarnation of divinity) who had, at least theoretically, absolute power over all people and land. His subjects were stratified into various classes: aristocracy, priests, administrators, peasants, and slaves. Official positions were sold to a limited number of elite members of society with enough money or goods to purchase them. Peasants paid these officials with rice, forest produce, or labor, and officials in turn paid the King with goods, or by using peasant labor. The distinction between the higher and lower levels of society was marked by hierarchical vocabulary and various rights and symbols. For example, Brahmanism was the religion of the royal court, while Mahayana Buddhism, ancestor worship, and animistic beliefs formed the religion of the masses.

Although not every king of the Angkor empire was equally strong, the cultural development of the period (which continues to give a strong sense of pride and ethnic identity to Khmer refugees here), is evident even today in the famous ruins of Angkor Wat and its complex of magnificent temples, palaces, libraries, and irrigation works. Even though historical sources provide us barely a glimpse of peasant life at this time, extensive irrigation works and the continuous abundance of fish in Lake Tonle

Sap suggest that large numbers of peasants would have engaged in agriculture or fishing. The biggest change of this period occurred in the thirteenth century, during the reign of King Jayavarman VII, when most of the population converted to Theravada Buddhism. This conversion was perhaps influenced by the proclamation of Theravada Buddhism as the national religion, and in fact, unified the society religiously and culturally.

Decline of Cambodia

By the fifteenth century, the declining Angkor empire began losing control over the people in present day Thailand. Principalities which were former vassals of Angkor declared their independence. The Thai became a major invading force and in 1430-31 their final sack of Angkor brought the empire to an end. The capital was moved from Angkor to the vicinity of Phnom Penh, located at the confluence of the Mekong and the Tonle Sap rivers, which aided the development of trade and commerce, and thus a dual economy.

After the downfall of Angkor, it became increasingly difficult to maintain Cambodian autonomy. Thailand and Annam (today's South Vietnam) became increasingly powerful, and gradually usurped much of what was formerly Cambodian territory. By the eighteenth century, Cambodia had declined politically and economically. Vietnam gained

control of the Southeastern frontier of Cambodia and when Vietnam, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian countries were opening trading posts to Spanish and Portuguese traders, the Vietnamese closed Phnom Penh to foreigners. The few Christian missionaries who gained entry were not successful in their missions because Theravada Buddhism was especially strong. Thus Cambodia was isolated from the outside world for nearly 200 years. When western culture and thought began to spread to other Asian countries, Cambodia was not exposed to them.

During her control the Vietnamese removed large portions of territory and thousands of ethnic Cambodians from Cambodian control, and stories about their mistreatment of Khmer people became legends passed on through generations. In addition to exercising military control, Vietnam tried to exert cultural control over Cambodia by colonizing the region with Vietnamese, and attempting to reform every aspect of Cambodian life style: language, dress, eating habits, patterns of measurement, land holdings, tax payments, irrigation works, and agricultural methods. In spite of this, as Chandler observes, "The two peoples lived on different sides of a deep cultural divide, perhaps the most sharply defined of those in effect in 19th century Southeast Asia" (Chandler 1971, 127). In 1830, the Vietnamese emperor wrote to his

administrators, "The customs of the (Cambodian) barbarians are so different from our own, that even if we capture all their territory, it would not be certain we could change them." Such attitudes and actions caused deep resentment and anti-Vietnamese feelings that persisted through centuries and are present among Cambodian refugees even today.

Unsuccessful sporadic rebellions broke out against the Vietnamese until the failure of a wide-ranging rebellion in 1840. In 1847, Vietnam withdrew her forces because of Thai intervention. Although Thais also invaded Cambodia and the Khmer rebelled against them, there was less resentment against Thais because, as Theravada Buddhists, they were culturally and religiously similar to the Khmer, and the Thais never attempted to impose cultural changes on them. Instead, the Thais governed Cambodian territory at most levels with ethnic Khmer. In 1848 King Duang, a Khmer king, ascended the throne under the auspices of Thai and Cambodian brahmans, and brought some peace to the country for the next twelve years.

Arrival of the French in Cambodia

In the mid 1850s, King Duang, plagued by Thais and Vietnamese, sought support from the French. But a French diplomatic mission sent in 1856 failed to reach the king

due to Thai intervention. King Duang died in 1860. His successor, King Norodom, was unpopular, especially in the eastern part of the country and among the Cham (Muslim Khmer), and so there were a series of civil wars. The king fled to Thailand and returned later with Thai support. However, he also started secret negotiations with the French to eliminate Thai control. In 1863 the French signed a secret treaty with Norodom, offering him the protection of a French Resident in exchange for timber concessions and mineral exploration rights. When the Thai learned about the treaty the king reaffirmed his dependence on them. In 1864 the Thai and the French cosponsored his crown, and for the first time in Cambodian history a Cambodian king accepted a crown from a European power. France gained control of Cambodia not through military power, but through Cambodia's need for protection. By 1867, Thai interference, which had begun to wane, was more or less eliminated, and Cambodia was largely free from invasions from her neighbors until World War II.

Cambodia Under the French

At the time the French arrived in Cambodia, the Cambodians seemed to have thought of their country, metaphorically, as a walled city with several imaginary gates at the places where invading armies traditionally entered the country. Maps were rarely used, and for the

villagers, Cambodia probably meant the area in which the language was spoken (Chandler 1983,99). Kingship had changed little since Angkor times. Theoretically, the king still had supreme power over legislative, judicial, and religious matters, as well as over land and people. Practically, his powers were somewhat curtailed by powerful officials, court intrigue, or popular opinion, as well as his conscience and adherence to Hindu or Buddhist precepts regarding proper kingly conduct and responsibility. In the second category of the social hierarchy were royal descendants up to the fifth generation, nobility, officials, and royal priests. Officials were graded hierarchically according to their titles and responsibilities. The ordinary people were the free peasants and slaves. They had no voice in government matters, and were liable for military and corvee labor as well as taxes. Although theoretically the king owned all the land, the free peasants had the right to cultivate land that had been left uncultivated for over three years, except for the rich river banks which the king rented out. Continuous cultivation of a parcel of land for over three years virtually established individual ownership, with rights of exclusive cultivation, transmission to heirs, and the right to rent, sell, or give to others. The king received his share of the yield from all such landowners.

The slaves were at the bottom of the social strata, and were of two types: insolvent debtors who were temporary slaves of creditors until debts were paid, and permanent slaves made up of tribal people captured from outskirts of villages, prisoners of war, criminals, individuals sold by their parents into slavery, and handicapped persons. However, there were laws outlining the rights of slaves and oppression was evidently not harsh (Ebihara 1971, 42).

The autocratic system was contrary to French ideas of rational, centralized control. The French began to feel King Norodom, more interested in his survival as king than sound administration of the country, was too authoritarian, and that he governed in an arbitrary manner. The populace rebelled against his acquiescence to the French. The rebels were quelled with difficulty with the support of Norodom's half brother, Sisowath, with whom the French had started secret negotiations in case a transfer of power became necessary. The French saw their role in Cambodia as a 'civilizing mission,' and in 1884, Charles Thomson, governor general of Cochin China, proposed reforms to replace Cambodian officials with French Residents in provincial cities, abolish slavery and institutionalize the ownership of land. Although these reforms struck at the heart of traditional Cambodian politics built on entourages, exploitation of labor, and the taxation of

harvests rather than land, the king was coerced to agree to them in order to remain on the throne. The Khmer elite, however, were enraged since they now became paid civil servants of the French. In 1885, a nationwide rebellion broke out lasting one and a half years. It became evident that the Cambodian status quo was too important to be tampered with by the French, and that the regional elites could effectively organize substantial guerrilla forces against them. The King, to whom the French turned, proclaimed traditional Cambodian laws and customs would be upheld if the rebels laid down their arms.

By 1897, with Norodom failing in health and mind because of opium supplied to him free by the French, the French Resident was granted executive authority to issue royal decrees, appoint officials, and collect taxes. In Phnom Penh, land became available for purchase by French citizens and slavery was abolished. But in the villages, servitude for debts as well as banditry remained, and life was as insecure as it had always been. After the king's death in 1904, Cambodia became a relatively important revenue-producing source for the French. In 1906, the French negotiated with the Thai for the return of Battambang and Siem Reap provinces, and in the 1920's, Battambang became the most prosperous province in the country, with the highest rice exports. These advances in

agricultural technologies were limited to the Northwestern part of the kingdom. In the rest of the country, expanding populations cultivated rice in traditional ways and remained relatively isolated from French influences.

By 1909, with the availability of typewriters, French Residents were required to spend more time producing monthly administrative reports. Automobiles made supervision of districts quicker, but more superficial. Together, these two factors removed the highly paid French officials more and more from the people they were to protect. The 'government' the peasants encountered were mostly Vietnamese subordinates whom the French brought in because of their ability to carry out administrative tasks in French. Till 1953 the Cambodian elite of high rank played a subordinate, ceremonial role, and those at the lower levels were underpaid colonial servants. The high salaries of French officials and their preference for Vietnamese civil servants over Cambodians were to have important effects on the development of Cambodian nationalism, especially after World War II.

The French financed almost all their expenses in Cambodia, including public works and salaries of their officials, by taxation on salt, rice and other crops, alcohol, opium, exports and imports, and by levying high fees for government services. Ninety days of corvee labor

per year were required from those too poor to pay, and even those who did pay were still liable to other labor requirements. The harshness of life during this period is well illustrated by Bunchan Mul, who later joined the Khmer Issarak, the Resistance fighters against colonialism (Mul 1982, 115-116).

During the period of French colonialism, the French controlled and oppressed our land and our people. The Khmer people underwent such great sorrows and sufferings that our eyeballs almost popped out of their sockets; it was very painful, we all had it up to our necks living under their iron yoke; we couldn't move or shake off the yoke except to shed tears, not knowing what to think. The Khmer had no rights or liberty at all; they took away our rights and we could not protest. Heavier and heavier taxes were imposed so that it was almost unbearable.

When the second World War started, communications by sea were cut off because of the extensive and strict control of the sea. Transportation of goods by sea was stopped and so our country became poorer and poorer; we had hardly enough clothing to cover ourselves. In some households of two or three members, there was only enough clothing for one person. If they wanted to go out (to the market or festivals) they had to take turns because of insufficient clothing. The ones that stayed home dared not go outside, because they had only an old piece of cloth or rags, or a piece of mosquito net or matting, just enough to cover their genitals; some even went naked. If friends or relatives came asking for them, they would reply from the inside of the house and did not dare to come out to greet guests. This only applied to the poor. As for the rich, they were not that badly off, for they had money to buy enough clothing.

During that time, because there were no imports or exports, the French collected all the products of the country so that they could trade; that is, all the products in the country, anything at all, had to be sold to them cheaply; then they put their trade mark on those products and retailed them back to the public at high prices. If they saw us carrying goods, like one kilogram of dried fish or smoked fish, a jar of fish

fat or even a bowl of beeswax, they would confiscate them and punish the owner as well. We could neither grow cotton nor weave our own clothes. Some people fearfully tried to weave their own clothes, behind clumps of banana trees or in the forest, only so that they could have sufficient clothes to wear.

In the 1920s, with the exception of royalty and a few favored officials, there was a wide gap between the earnings and taxation of French and Cambodian officials. While a French official could earn 12,000 piastres per year, a Khmer was paid much less for similar work, and was the first to have earnings cut in the 1930s depression. And while the official earning 12,000 piastres paid 30 piastres a year in tax, a farmer earning about 40 to 90 piastres a year, had to pay as much as 12 piastres a year in tax. Local leaders tried to ease the tax burden a little by maintaining improper records, but the tactics were exposed after some time.

Despite the high level of taxation, French spending on Cambodians was almost negligible before the 1930's. In 1922 a French officer called efforts in the fields of education and medical services "a mere facade." Electricity and running water were almost unknown outside Phnom Penh. As Chandler says, Cambodian money in effect only financed French comforts in return for which Cambodians were protected from outside control, as well as the perils of independence. Curiously the French believed that because of Khmer resistance to their 'modernizing'

ideas, the 'innate' character of the Cambodians made them immune to modern ideas, or that they were inherently hostile to them. Yet, they also prohibited the Sangha, or the monks, from "teaching reforms or from spreading among the faithful, modern ideas which conflict with traditional religion" (Chandler 1971, 157).

Taxation was increased in World War I and in late 1915 some 300 peasants from northeast of the capital presented a petition to King Sisowath (who had replaced Norodom). Although the French levied the taxes, they were collected by Cambodian officials. Larger and larger peasant delegations traveled to the city to protest and French police estimated that more than 40,000 peasants passed through the city in 1916. The organization and speed with which the people gathered together in this '1916 Affair' as it became known, shocked the French, who had so far viewed the Khmer as lazy, individualistic, and impervious to leadership and ideology (Chandler 1983, 154). In addition to these direct protests, Residents' monthly reports showed that rural violence and disorder were widespread. However, since French control was not directly challenged, these uprisings did not become political. The direct protests had little effect since justice was sought from the king, who pacified the populace by canceling further corvee for that year. But in 1925 matters came to

a head when a French resident named Bardez was murdered while trying to collect taxes from overburdened villagers. At the murder trial it became evident that on a per capita basis the 'docile' and 'obedient' Cambodian peasants were charged the highest taxes in Indochina, a fact that the French tried hard to suppress.

The above incidents demonstrate how little the French knew about Cambodians, their social organization, and communication, despite more than fifty years of occupation. They had continued to believe what Chandler calls a myth about the "peaceable Cambodian character," for though most Cambodians extolled and practiced the notions of harmony and cooperation, there were many exceptions such as the Issarak and the Khmer Rouge, as later history also shows. The French were ignorant largely because many French officials, including Bardez, were incapable of speaking Khmer after many years of service in the country, which of course prevented them from gaining an intimate knowledge of the peasants. In fact, another French Resident commented, "It is permissible to ask if the unvarying calm which the Cambodian people continue to exhibit is not merely an external appearance, covering up vague, unexpressed feelings. . . whose exact nature we cannot perceive" (Chandler 1971, 160). Equally important to recognize here is that with no communication between the French and the

Khmer peasants, there was no way for the latter to acquire a knowledge of western ideas, even though they were aware of the French who ruled their land. The peasants were largely restricted to their villages and their people due to their livelihoods, and due to lack of effective transportation or communication methods. So unless the French went out to the peasants, there was little chance for peasants to come into contact with them.

The Bardez incident, however, does not seem to have had much impact on French complacency. The 1920s brought an economic boom in Indochina, but in Cambodia, corvee labor and taxes were still used for public works such as developing seaside resorts and mountain hotels, benefiting the French. Near the end of the decade, paved and gravel roads were built throughout the country and a 500 kilometer stretch of railroad was constructed between Phnom Penh and Battambang and later extended to the Thai border. These developments favored Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants as well since they could now exploit the rural economy through rice exports and rubber plantations.

Development of Cambodian Nationalism and Independence

The French were very slow to develop education in Cambodia other than to support wat or temple schools where students were taught traditional subjects in traditional

ways. It was only in 1936 that Cambodians got their first lycee. Until then, a few students received a French education either in France or in French schools in Saigon. Among them was Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who, at 19 years of age, was crowned King in 1941. He was chosen because the French expected him to be easily manipulated to suit their needs.

After the 1930s, a new generation of students including Saloth Sar or Pol Pot and other leaders of the autogenocidal Khmer Rouge regime, acquired democratic, nationalist, and socialist ideals of the French revolution, and became the new Cambodian elite. A new nationalist consciousness about colonialism, Vietnamese domination of the Cambodian civil service, and Chinese domination of Cambodian commerce began to develop among this group. The Cambodian Communist party was formed around this time. In 1937, an association of graduates, the first of its kind, had a membership of more than 500. One of the very first Khmer newspapers, Nagaravatta was founded by Son Ngoc Than, leader of the Khmer Nationalists at the time. This newspaper saw as its mission the 'political awakening' of the Khmer people. After World War II, the first Khmer language newspaper, Khmer Krok (Cambodia, Awake) gave thousands of Cambodians their first chance to read of events in the outside world in their own language. By the

end of 1945 an independent Cambodia, almost unimaginable in 1939, had become primarily a matter of time.

Through all these developments, one group that worried the French more than others was the Sangha. They commanded great respect and obedience from the people, and the French saw them as a group who offered the people an alternative value system to the colonial one. The Sangha did prove to be a considerable force when they organized the first Cambodian nationalist demonstration in 1942, which became embedded in Cambodian anti-colonial ideas. In 1943, the French Resident forcibly changed the Khmer alphabet to a Romanized system in the belief that a change in the status quo of Khmer society would improve the natives' thinking about the outside world. Many people, especially the Sangha, saw the reforms as an attack on traditional education and the high status accorded to traditional educators in Cambodia, and thus an attack on an essential character of their civilization passed down since Angkorean times.

It was the Japanese action of disarming the French administrators during World War II that gave the Khmer the immediate strength to fight for independence. Supported by the Japanese, the Thais also waged war against the French and captured the northwestern territories of Cambodia. At the request of the Japanese, Cambodians declared

independence in 1945 and changed the name of the country to Kampuchea. One of the first acts of this newly independent Cambodia was to reinstate the Khmer alphabet. Feelings about the Romanization of the alphabet were so strong that the decree abrogating the reforms said that for Cambodia to adopt the Roman alphabet would be for the society to become "a society without history, without value, without mores, and without traditions" (Chandler 1971, 171).

The French, however, returned to power in 1945. Although they tried to recapture their former status, it was not possible and they had to concede some powers to the Cambodian elite whom they needed for the administration of the country. King Sihanouk opened negotiations with the French, with complete independence as the ultimate goal. In 1946, the Khmer were allowed to form political parties for the first time. Two major parties emerged: Democrats, promoting ideas of Cambodian independence along the lines of the democracy its leader admired in France, and the Liberals, who preferred to maintain the hierarchical social system with some aid from France for some time. Though the Democrats won the elections, they discovered that freedom could not be declared, but had to be granted by the French. Furthermore, Sihanouk, hoping to gain independence diplomatically through peaceful negotiations, did not allow them to function effectively. By now the Khmer communists

who had allied with forces in Vietnam and Laos had formed formidable forces of resistance fighters known as the 'Khmer Issarak'. In 1946 they struck their first real blow by wiping out the entire French garrison at Siem Reap and capturing their stock of arms. Over the next few years their bases extended over northwestern, southwestern, and southeastern regions of Cambodia. Between 1946 and 1949 People's Committees and self-defense units were formed at district and at times, village levels, some of which harassed the villagers. As the organization developed, the groups were linked to form a large, united military-political organization.

King Sihanouk was not allied with the Khmer Issarak since they were opposed to a Monarchy. Nevertheless, he used their victories to strengthen his negotiations for independence by insisting that all of Cambodia supported them in their demands for independence. The French, however, refused to grant full independence to Cambodia, saying they needed the Cambodian bases to fight the war with the Vietminh. But by 1949, mostly due to communist victories in China and North Vietnam, and intensification of the war in Indochina, the French signed a treaty allowing the Cambodians some freedom in foreign affairs and military autonomy in Battambang and Siem Reap, which the Thais had returned. King Sihanouk called this "fifty

percent independence." In 1952, Sihanouk assumed power as prime minister, appointed his own cabinet, and promised to gain independence within three years. In 1953, after making unsuccessful representations to the French President, and then to the United States, whose reply was that Cambodia should work with the French to defeat communism, Sihanouk returned to the country, and refused to cooperate with the French. Later in 1953, he judiciously combined the war in Vietnam which was going badly for the French with the possibility of increased fighting in Cambodia and his own armed forces, and extracted powers over the armed forces, judiciary, and foreign affairs. The French kept their hold on Cambodian economics. Finally, in 1954, at the Geneva Conference, Cambodia was granted full independence. But the Issaraks, who contributed much to Sihanouk's success in defeating the French, were not allowed representation at the conference by China and other western powers.

The Sihanouk Era

At the Geneva Conference, Cambodia promised to hold general elections in 1955, at which all political parties could participate. New political groups were also formed, including the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (Popular Socialist Community). The Sangkum, as it was popularly called, was under the leadership of Prince Sihanouk, who abdicated

saying he could not "head a small aristocratic class to exploit his own people," and sought elections as Chief of State because "as a monarch, he was a prisoner of tradition; by leaving the throne, he would democratize and liberalize the regime" (Suyin 1971, 75). When Sihanouk formed the Sangkum, several political groups dissolved in its favor and the Sangkum won the elections in 1955. Sihanouk became Chief of State, dominating the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of the government. Lon Nol became the Minister of National Defense, and remained in control of military establishments in one post or another throughout the Sihanouk years.

In independent Cambodia Sihanouk was "the well-beloved leader, father, brother, cherished ideal inspiration and animator of his people" (Suyin 1971, 74). According to Suyin, Sihanouk's concept of happiness for his people was "peace, security, a modest prosperity, the abolition of feudalism, and some form of socialism based on Buddhist concepts" (Suyin 1971, 76). To achieve these, he fostered intimacy with the peasantry by communicating with them in the popular idiom during frequent visits to villages.

To foster the spirit of community among the people, Sihanouk gave new significance to old symbols. The first of these symbols was the monarchy, representing not only

Cambodian history and culture, but also the present regime's political conservatism based on neutrality and moderation. With Sihanouk's closeness to the masses, the monarchy was no longer a remote power indifferent to the needs of the people, but "one of a benevolent paternalistic authority upon whose judgment rests their welfare and the nation's destiny" (Smith 1971, 71).

Buddhism was another symbol used by Sihanouk to connect the people to their historic past. It acted as a cohesive agent by providing them with a common philosophy. Among the Buddhist values which Sihanouk extolled were brotherhood of man, self-help, and self-sacrifice for the good of the group. These ideals were also integrated into the newly expanded educational system.

A third concept Sihanouk tried to introduce was that of nation. This was a difficult notion for the peasantry, first, because they had been historically isolated in villages with little connections to the capital; second, because they were aware of the social inequality between the elite and the masses. Sihanouk tried to bring the elite and the peasantry closer by using both groups in the socioeconomic development of the country. He urged the elite to exercise moderation, and tried to inculcate in the peasantry the idea of equality under the Buddhist religion and before the law. But Sihanouk, believing that only his

successful relationship with the populace assured the stability of the country, never fully succeeded in unifying Cambodia.

During this time new groups of graduates began to return from France. Unlike earlier students who had studied politically neutral subjects, these groups came with legal, political, and economic educational backgrounds. Nevertheless, the Sangkum remained traditional and elitist, and these younger, politically ambitious intellectuals were not allowed to introduce any significant changes. Furthermore, it was not possible to absorb all of them into government offices. Sihanouk tried to encourage them to return to their provinces, where good teachers and public servants were badly needed. Dissatisfaction among the new intellectuals spread, since the Sangkum remained a loose coalition of powerful families and cliques of different ideologies. Those favored by the sovereign became prosperous; there was no place for a middle class.

As time went on, Sihanouk became increasingly concerned by a threat from American supported Khmer Serei based in Thailand and South Vietnam. He also feared that the CIA was planning to overthrow his government with their support. He believed that too many of his more conservative generals and ministers were becoming dependent

upon both American aid and American attitudes, and that the North Vietnamese communists would win the war. By the end of 1962 he terminated American economic and military aid, and a little over a year later broke off diplomatic relations with the United States, claiming that Americans were trying to interfere in Cambodian internal affairs and dictate Cambodia's policy.

After Sihanouk terminated American aid, the money supply shrunk and steps taken by him to nationalize the economy were not followed by suitable economic measures. Only the rich lived well, but even they found the return on capital invested in villas and import licenses vastly reduced. Minor civil servants, for whom bribes had been an essential supplement to meager salaries, joined the unemployed graduates and the officer corps in bitter resentment of the expulsion of the Americans and the socialization of the economy. Towards the latter part of Sihanouk's rule, there was widespread corruption especially among those in power.

Sihanouk's fear and dislike of anyone who opposed his views grew as the dissatisfaction of those around him increased. Leaders of opposing political parties were harassed, and in the beginning of 1963, Sihanouk blamed a student demonstration in Siem Reap on left-wing ministers, some of whom were forced to resign. Many of them,

including Saloth Sar or Pol Pot as he was later known, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Sampan (all of whom later emerged as the leaders of the Khmer Rouge), disappeared from their jobs and joined the communist forces in the jungle. The country continued to decline politically and economically, and the first large peasant revolt in the Battambang Province was suppressed with bloodshed. This was followed by more revolts. A 1967 peasant uprising again in Battambang, though quickly suppressed, had Sihanouk worried. Although by now the conservatives in the government (particularly Lon Nol) had started to voice growing concern about ties between indigenous insurgents and Vietnamese communists, for the first time Sihanouk also attributed the troubles not to Khmer Serei, but to outside communist leadership, specifically Hanoi. From this point on, Sihanouk became increasingly worried about the communist infiltration into Cambodia.

Sihanouk was strongly anti-communist and he tried to indoctrinate in the people's minds the idea of neutrality in foreign affairs. In international politics, Sihanouk devised methods of playing his neighbors off against one another, exploiting both their ambitions and their weaknesses. Although opposed to communism in his own country, he maintained a neutral foreign policy; he maintained diplomatic relations with socialist countries,

and accepted aid from them. The Soviet Union provided Cambodia with a hospital, while China built factories. Initially he also had close relations with the United States, and in 1955, a Khmer-American military aid agreement was signed. The United States became the chief supplier of the Cambodian army. Although relations with the United States were terminated in 1963, by 1969 Sihanouk again approached the United States, but more for economic than military need. After the United States began its political and military commitment to the anti-communist regime in Saigon, American officials found that Cambodia posed for them many problems with her neutrality.

With the recrudescence of the Vietnam War, the United States and South Vietnam pressured Sihanouk for support. According to Suyin, Sihanouk felt

The best way to maintain American influence in Southeast Asia is, for the US to give up her doomed adventure in South Vietnam, and to withdraw her troops. Only by withdrawing her military force and bases in Indochina can whatever honor, prestige, presence or influence America still retains in Asia be maintained. For in this era of rising nationalism, (he says) the maintenance, against a people's will, of bases and foreign soldiers in uniform on their territory is to invite hatred and resistance, in fact the very opposite to what is desired. (Sihanouk says that) every bomb dropped by the Americans in Vietnam creates more communists than all the propaganda from Peking (Suyin 1971, 78).

Shawcross says that in contrast, the American Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, felt that to withdraw

would be disastrous, because a victory by a third class communist peasant state over the United States would strengthen the most bellicose communist factions around the world. Sihanouk did not support requests for aid by the United States and Saigon because of his fears of Vietnamese territorial demands on Cambodia. Eventually Saigon and the United States accused Cambodia of providing refuge for communist troops.

Although Sihanouk distrusted and disliked the Vietnamese, he recognized the power of Hanoi. Although he realized that Cambodia would be far more vulnerable to a united Marxist Vietnam than to a divided nation at war, he believed that he had no alternative to reaching an ambiguous modus vivendi with the communists. In 1965 he allowed them to come across the ill-defined border and build temporary base camps in areas of the eastern provinces of his county. A request to Kissinger and Nixon by the American General Westmoreland to 'Search and Destroy' these communist strongholds or 'sanctuaries' was granted, and America started secretly bombing the Cambodian countryside causing great destruction. Shawcross writes of these bombings,

Twenty times that night the ground controllers, sitting in their air-conditioned 'hootches' in South Vietnam, cans of Coke or 7-Up by their elbows, called out 'hack'. Sixty long strings of bombs spread through the dark and fell to the earth faster than the speed of sound. Each plane load dropped into an area, or 'box',

about half a mile wide by two miles long, and as each bomb fell, it threw up a fountain of earth, trees and bodies, until the air above the targets was thick with dust and debris, and the ground itself flashed with explosions and fire. For the first time in the war, so far as is known, forty-eight of such boxes were stamped upon neutral Cambodia by the express order of the President (p. 24). . . .

Over the next fourteen months, 3,630 B-52 raids were flown against suspected communist bases along different areas of Cambodia's border (p. 26). . . . (although) the assertion that no Cambodians lived in these areas not only was untrue, but was known to be untrue at the time. The Joint Chiefs themselves informed the administration as early as April, 1969, that many of the sanctuary areas were populated by Cambodians who might be endangered by bombing raids. The White House was to ignore this reservation (p. 28). . . . And official, highly classified Pentagon computer printouts of the bombing of Indochina continued to show "Nil" for Cambodia in 1969.

To avoid the attacks, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong pushed their sanctuaries and supply bases deeper into Cambodia, and the area that the B-52s bombarded expanded as the year passed. The war spread. The Cambodian left accused Sihanouk of secretly selling out to the United States.

By 1970, although Cambodia was not nearly as impoverished as most other Asian countries, and was spared the problems of landlessness or absentee landlordism in general, the stagnant economy and a bad harvest of 1969 also seem to have been enough to create at least pockets of peasant discontent. Yet, the vast majority of peasants continued to consider Sihanouk as a modern day god-king, and the Cambodian communist movement of the Khmer Rouge

remained small and insignificant. He had by now alienated the upper class, the bourgeoisie, and the army by depriving them of their traditional financial advantages. While Sihanouk was out of the country, he was ousted in a coup orchestrated by Prime Minister Lon Nol, who was quite partial to the United States, and harbored an absolute hatred for the Vietnamese. Allman describes the March 28, 1970 coup as "an upper class coup, and not a revolution" (Allman 1971, 97). Sihanouk formed a government in exile, the National United Front of Cambodia, and joined his former enemies, the Khmer Rouge. Under Lon Nol, Cambodia became a republic on April 10, 1970.

The Lon Nol Era

With his accession to power, Lon Nol declared that he would adhere to Sihanouk's neutral foreign policy. But his decidedly pro-American, anti-communist policy disrupted Sihanouk's carefully designed dichotomy between domestic and foreign policy. As the two policies became more closely tied, the external and internal opposition forces got closer together.

The Lon Nol government started its regime by wooing the elite, the urbanites, and the students, promising economic prosperity. They promised increased incomes and job opportunities through denationalization of the economic structure, encouragement of private enterprise, and foreign

investment capitals. In addition, the new regime tried to instill a new national spirit by promising to repulse Vietnamese communists from border regions. This also helped to justify an increase for military expenses in the new budget.

By asserting its 'active' neutrality through an anti-communist campaign, the new government hoped to attract American support. The army was completely behind the new regime. Not only did the officers profess loyalty to Lon Nol as their commanding officer, they were also attracted to the possibility of again having the more bountiful days they once had, with American aid.

In much of the countryside where the Sihanouk government's corruption and his autocracy had been less effective, he was still the god king. Rioting broke out against Lon Nol, and spread to towns as well. The government charged that the riots were incited by the Viet Cong and suppressed them with brutal force. The aggressive acts of the Lon Nol army against peasantry only drove them to join the communists. The Khmer Rouge, as the Cambodian communists were called, who had till then numbered a couple of hundred, gained in strength.

To compensate for the lack of peasant support, Lon Nol exploited the Khmers' traditional fear of the Vietnamese. There were some 40,000 Vietnamese who had

remained in Cambodia after the division of French Indochina, and most of them were merchants. Like Lon Nol himself, most had profited from trading with Vietnamese communists, but they did not support the communists. While Sihanouk had deliberately controlled violent racial antipathies that existed between the two races, Lon Nol began to brand all Vietnamese as members of the Viet Cong. Massacres of Vietnamese civilians in the name of anti-communism marked symbolically the new government's hatred of both the Vietnamese and the communists. The Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese communists, who had previously operated largely in separate areas and with different objectives, were now drawn together.

United States military aid had started secretly in April, with the supply of automatic rifles and several thousand Khmer Krom troops from South Vietnam. Within a year, the Lon Nol army was, at Kissinger's insistence, a force of 220,000 men. Unknown to the Government, the United States continued massive sanctuary invasions, and it was only when thousands of South Vietnamese troops poured into the major cities, often looting as they came, that the real dimensions of Cambodia's plight became evident to its citizens (Grant 1971:113). With the American invasions, the Vietnamese communists withdrew from their confined positions along the border, and moved farther into

Cambodia. When the American government withdrew its forces on June 30, 1974, the Cambodian government controlled only the larger towns and at best, half the countryside. Hopes of economic development had been dashed, trade was at a standstill, 90 percent of all rubber plantations had been destroyed, tourism to the Angkor ruins was halted, and inflation was severe. Communists gained in both popular support and territorial control. What began as a domestic struggle between Lon Nol and Sihanouk ended up as the stage for the struggle between the free world and communism, and communism won. On April 17, 1975, the Cambodian communists, the Khmer Rouge, entered Phnom Penh as victors, and the people, weary of war and hardship, welcomed them with much joy.

(The preceding is taken mainly from Chandler 1983 and Grant 1971).

CHAPTER 4

THE KHMER ROUGE REGIME: IMPACTS ON SOCIETY

Cambodian Society Before the Khmer Rouge

In pre-revolutionary Cambodian society the nuclear family was "the glue that held the society together" (Ngor 1987, 105). The mother dealt with all household matters and child rearing in particular, and the prosperity, well-being, and reputation of the household depended mostly on her. The father dealt with the outside world and provided major family support. Khmer society generally had social norms based on Buddhist teachings promoting male female equality, and many women engaged in business ventures, even when their financial needs were not severe. When necessary, children helped their mothers to earn extra incomes, and there was usually a strong empathetic bond between mothers and children. Even after children married and set up their own nuclear households, they continued to interact closely with their parents and siblings for mutual physical, emotional, and financial needs. In her description of a pre-revolutionary Cambodian village society, Ebihara observes,

The nuclear family can be considered the most fundamental social group, bound together by a variety

of affective, economic, moral, and legal ties. The strongest and most enduring relationships in village life are found in the bonds between husband and wife, sibling and sibling, and especially parent and child. Even after a family of orientation has split into the various families of procreation of the different offspring, members of the former often retain deep affection for and frequent contact with one another. According to both legal and cultural norms, family members should (and usually do,) offer one another daily support, loyalty, and consideration, as well as special assistance in time of trouble. . . . (Ebihara 1971, 111).

The legal and cultural norms of duties to family members were based on Buddhist precepts, and covered such things as parental authority, arrangement of proper marriages for children, provision of support in the event of divorce and in old age, inheritance, adoption, guardianship, and provision of proper funeral arrangements. The ideals were passed down through generations by stories such as 'The Human Bird' related by Koun Srey (chapter 9). Children generally received a great deal of affection in the first few years of life not only from parents, but also from other adults and adolescents. But as they grew, older children were expected to conform to norms of politeness and obedience. According to Ebihara, although some competition was present in games, the stress was on playing rather than winning. By age ten or so, both sexes had been taught basic skills needed to be useful members of society. Boys, particularly in villages, learned agricultural techniques, while girls learned household duties. In

adolescent years the two sexes were segregated in school, which was strictly a place for education, and not for entertainment or romance. Pre-marital sex was deplored and sexual knowledge not considered suitable for children, since it was considered to lead to desire and trouble. The people also did not display physical love publicly even after marriage. Ideally, marriages were arranged by parents.

Education

The Khmer place great emphasis on education. In this regard, the welfare of the individual child came before that of the family, even when the child's contribution to the economic welfare of the family was most valuable. But when the needs of the family became severe, the children had to stop their formal education until times were better.

Traditionally, learning was done by rote with emphasis on Khmer history, language and literature, and Buddhist doctrine. Students were expected to obey and show respect to their teachers. Unlike in the West, in Cambodian villages, education was considered more as a way to grow up to be 'good men and women' who were useful members of society, rather than as a means to secure future social and financial advancement. Although western ideas spread with the arrival of the French, they did not spread too much in rural areas, where about 85 percent of the

ethnic Khmer lived. Even after independence, government schools in both towns and villages continued to guide students in the awareness of their civic duties because

The individual's good conduct and services to the community will be approved by his neighbors and he will gain more respect from his fellows. In recognition he may be awarded a higher position within the religious, governmental or community organizations (Chhim 1987, 14).

In the larger society, traditions based on Buddhist precepts emphasized respect, particularly for those higher in age for their wisdom. Indian cultural values, which gave Cambodia a hierarchical social system, also placed emphasis on respect for those higher in the social hierarchy.

Khmer Language

The Khmer language is linguistically classified as belonging to the Austro-Asiatic stock and the Mon-Khmer language family. It is non-tonal and has 30 vowels and 21 consonants. It lacks verb tenses and conjugations, articles, gender, and number. Khmer has a fairly complex morphology, with prefixation and infixation. Syntax is fairly similar to English sentence structure, although it can become quite different and complicated in longer sentence constructions.

The Khmer language has four different registers denoting social differences in speaking to or about (a)

royalty, (b) monks, (c) elderly or respected members of society, and (d) equals. For instance, the verb 'eat' may differ according to whether monks, nobility, ordinary people, children, or animals eat, or whether one speaks formally or casually. Ebihara says that these differences are clearly defined and consciously used by the people, and are further distinguished by appropriate body language. A villager speaking to a government official for example, will use formal Khmer depending on his level of education, while also denoting respect through various gestures such as offering or accepting items with both hands. When talking to a villager of equal age and status, however, he will use 'colloquial' speech and will have quite different hand motions such as slapping the other on the arm or the back to heighten a joke.

French was the main European and the 'second language' in Cambodia. English was introduced only around 1967, and only in cities. Sanskrit derivatives are common in the realms of government and literature, while Pali is used in Buddhist canon.

Buddhism as a Way of Life

Like all Buddhists, the Khmer look towards the 'Ratana Thrai' or the Three Jewels for their knowledge. The Three Jewels are Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. The

Buddha was not a divine god but a human being. Though he learned from other teachers, he finally attained enlightenment through his own individual effort. Dhamma are the teachings of the Buddha. The teachings profess a certain way of life, but there are no mandatory rules and regulations such as attending temple, giving alms, or even following the precepts. Based on the Buddha's own individual achievements, much importance is attached to individual learning, leading to understanding and conviction of the teachings as providing the correct lifestyle. Though social expectations exert a certain pressure on people to live according to the teachings, individual commitment and effort in living according to the precepts vary. In fact, it should be remembered that Cambodia, the gentle land, was also the land of the autogenocidal Khmer Rouge. Sangha are the clergy who disseminate Buddha's teachings to laymen. They reside in temples, and rules of honesty and sobriety are more exacting for the Sangha than for lay people. Cambodians hold the Sangha in the highest esteem both as exemplars of Buddhist values and as educators.

On a secular level, Buddhist teachings try to promote a sense of both individual and social responsibility, and the aim is to avoid causing harm or fear to others through one's conduct. As such, a Buddhist way of life for lay

people starts at a young age with the first five precepts of the code of conduct: one should not kill any living being; one should not steal; one should not commit adultery; one should not lie; one should not consume intoxicants. In Cambodia, causes and effects of these and other concepts about daily life were taught to children by monks, teachers, and elders. Children were guided to develop non-violent, non-aggressive cooperative, and tolerant habits through an emphasis on "the avoidance of causing suffering, self-discipline and improvement, humility, passivity, temperance, non-accumulation of wealth, and harmonious relations with others" (Chhim 1987, 13).

On a spiritual level, Buddhist teachings are based on a theory of reincarnation. Buddhists believe life is a cyclical and recurrent process. Life causes suffering due to its impermanence, and depending on the results of one's actions or karma (kamma), an individual may be born in a better or a worse place in the next birth. Karma or kamma can be improved by living according to Buddhist precepts, and through meritorious actions. The ultimate goal for a Buddhist is to end the cycle of rebirths with the attainment of 'Nirvana', to be achieved only by individual effort and not through divine intervention.

Merit is acquired by adhering to the Eightfold Path,

which embodies all of the precepts mentioned above, and consists of right understanding, right purpose, right speech, right conduct, right vocation, right effort, right thinking and right meditation. The Eightfold Path primarily develops the mind and not the body, as it is believed that it is the mindfulness, or the wisdom of a person, that is passed on to the next birth. Like all other objects, the physical form is subject to decay. Hence, the Khmer are encouraged to give generously both of themselves and of material things and to get rid of their worldly desires, which prolongs the life cycle. Instead, they are encouraged to develop their inner selves.

Buddhism and Cambodian Folk Religious Beliefs

An important part of Buddhism is not only the acquisition of merit for oneself, but also its transference to others, especially the dead. Buddhism, with its non-aggressive and non-violent norms, has characteristically been tolerant towards other religious systems and in Cambodia, it co-exists with folk religious beliefs centering around supernatural beings, magical rituals, and other practices.

In the context of the Khmer Rouge killings and the refugees' adjustments, ghosts known as "kmauit" (meaning corpse) are important. These are comparable to ghosts in the western sense, that is, spirits of dead persons. But

in Cambodia, these are especially spirits of those who commit suicide, or are murdered. It is believed that these ghosts wander about in either human or animal form. Some live on dirt and excrement, although they eat rice and other food placed in the fields for them. Others inhabit large trees. Kmauit are a source of very real fear to Cambodians. People try to help these spirits attain a better life by transferring merit to them by acts of kindness or generosity done in their memory. One of the most effective means to achieve this is by offering food or other necessary items, in the memory of the dead, to monks who spend their time in educational pursuits, or to any hungry person or animal. However, no one is coerced to give anything, and one may give only as much as one wishes to. Very often, donations are given in cooperation with others. When donations are made to monks in particular, the Khmer tend to give the best. They also display donations by walking around with them outside so that any kmauit wondering about may be consoled, knowing they are remembered. 'Prachum Ben', an annual ceremony, is held solely for remembering the dead. Chhim sums up the importance of Buddhism in Khmer life as follows:

Religion has a deep root in the Khmer traditional society, not only on the artistic and cultural life, but it also shaped the personality and the mentality of the Khmer people entirely. The pagoda, (the temple,) the supreme and sacred place of Buddhism, is considered

the pillar of the Khmer society. Everybody spends one's life around it. The Khmer pagoda is the best example of a social, medical, spiritual and artistic center of the Khmer people. All private or socio-economic problems in the community usually find their satisfactory solution in the pagoda. Therefore, during a three day New Year celebration, the Khmer go to the pagoda bringing food and some offering to the Buddhist monks. They request that the monks recite and preach the Buddha's doctrines. They, especially on the third day of the New Year, give an annual bath not only to Buddha statues, but also to the monks, the elderly people and the teachers. The monks are invited to chant the Dhamma in order to consecrate good deeds to the dead (Chhim 1987, 56).

The Khmer Rouge Holocaust, its Victims, and the Survivors

For over 2000 years, Cambodian history and ideology evolved around Indian cultural concepts and Buddhist religious teachings. The nuclear family was the basic and most binding unit. Society was divided into hierarchical social groups with equality within the groups. The highest respect for life was professed at all levels of society, and Cambodian social values included non-violence, non-aggression, honesty, generosity, harmony, tolerance, and cooperation. Words were as important as actions in achieving these goals.

The Khmer Rouge ideals were independence, peace, neutrality, non-alignment, sovereignty, democracy, and prosperity for Cambodia and "her correct and clear-sighted revolutionary organization, which won a great victory of tremendous historical significance on April 17, 1975" (Ngor 1987, 91). But it soon became clear that the new regime

had one other goal: to take revenge on officials of the former government who were their enemies in the war, the educated and wealthy urbanites who were 'new people' tainted with western ideas, Buddhist monks considered parasites living off other people's labor, and the Vietnamese, who were historical enemies of the Khmer people. The Khmer Rouge demonstrated their intention for revenge when they declared "BLOOD AVENGES BLOOD!" (Ngor 1987, 140). As Ngor explains,

In our language, 'blood' has its ordinary meaning, the red liquid in the body, and another meaning of kinship or family. Blood avenges blood. You kill us, we kill you. We 'new' people had been on the other side of the Khmer Rouge in the civil war Symbolically, the Khmer Rouge had just announced that they were going to take revenge (Ngor 1987, 140).

To take revenge, they declared,

Everybody is equal now! Everybody is the same! No more sompheap! (Gesture of greeting or submission). No more masters and no more servants! The wheel of history is turning! You must follow Angka's rules! (Ngor 1987, 83).

The wheel of history indeed turned. Every man, woman, and child was caught in the spokes; all were broken, many were crushed. Equality started with the completely unexpected, forced evacuation of the masses to the countryside so all would become peasants, regardless of previous social, ethnic, economic background, age, sex, or physical state. Vocabulary denoting social and family relationships was abolished. Parents, teachers, elders,

monks, children, all became 'comrades'. From the very beginning families were separated temporarily or permanently because people were away from home at the time of evacuation, were lost in the streets among the massive crowds, or were killed by the revolutionary soldiers even before the evacuation. Five or six days after the evacuation one evacuee observed, "Like us, everyone was stripped of their past, borne up by the one remaining reality, the family. Those with families had a source of encouragement, strength, help, food, and hope for the future. Those who were alone--especially the old, seemed to drift, lost and hopeless" (Yathay 1987, 33). But the reality that was 'family' was not to remain for long; tearing it up continued relentlessly. Fathers, mothers, and children were forcibly separated into age and sex graded work camps because "this was 'liberation', because it freed us from the time of caring for others and gave us more time to work" (Ngor 1987, 198). Many separations ended in deaths because of deliberate killings, sickness, starvation, or suicide.

Under the new regime, the individual was not worthy of consideration. The individual was erased, except as a unit in a group. The only thing that mattered was Angka, the high revolutionary organization governing the country. Angka would make Cambodia an egalitarian, agrarian, self-

sufficient country using the labor of the people, without the aid of any machinery or western technological knowledge.

"If Angka says to break rocks, break rocks. If Angka says to dig canals, you must dig canals. If Angka says to farm, you must farm. . . .

We don't need the technology of the capitalists. We don't need to send our young people to school. Our school is the farm. The land is our paper. The plow is our pen. We will 'write' by plowing. We don't need to give exams or award certificates. Knowing how to farm and knowing how to dig canals--those are our certificates," he said.

"We don't need doctors anymore. They are not necessary. If someone needs to have their intestines removed, I will do it." He made a cutting motion with an imaginary knife across his stomach. "It is easy. There is no need to learn how to do it by going to school" (Ngor 1987, 133, 139).

The revolution involved a complete break from the past. Currency, education, Buddhism, and all other social needs of the past were stripped from people's lives. Buddhist temples, the most sacred and peaceful spaces in Cambodia where the Sangha lived and taught the sanctity of all life, especially human life, were turned into brutal prisons. In these prisons, people were starved, verbally and physically abused, left to die, or were killed. The Sangha were either killed or disrobed and put to work. Educational establishments became centers to torture the educated, and hospitals became morgues where the infirm were left to die, or discarded before they died. Corpses were carted away to be thrown into massive pits. Some were only partially buried, and some left in the fields to be

devoured by wild animals.

Of those who were alive, the Angka controlled every aspect of life. They controlled people's food, drink, dress, possessions, sleep, speech, movement, work, and the right to live itself. And they controlled all this by violating every code of conduct that had been the essence of Cambodian society. Families, Cambodia's basic social units, were ripped apart not only through physical separation, but also through emotional separation when children were employed to spy on their parents and other adults. Family members were turned against one another through fear of personal safety. In a country that once exported rice and where food was generously shared with monks, relatives, and friends, people were deliberately starved to death. Respect for others through word and action was completely ignored. People often were allowed only four hours of sleep. They were used as oxen to plow the land, or to push carts transporting rice and other necessities. They were made to collect and haul human and animal excrement with their bare hands, to be used for fertilizer. If any tasks were not done to the regime's satisfaction, or if someone was perceived to have leanings towards the 'old ways', indeed, for any gratuitous reason, suspected victims were abused verbally with threats against their lives and those of their loved ones. They were

abused physically with severe beatings with whips, and bamboo poles, kicked, tied up in plastic bags and thrown around, tied to trees and carved to pieces, tied up and 'smoked' over fires, maimed, denied food and water, and killed.

Every Buddhist precept was violated. The regime's contempt for the first, and perhaps the most important precept, one should not kill, was absolute. Life had no value. The methods of killing through starvation, torture, denial of medical assistance or personal care by other family members, were completely contrary to the pre-revolutionary social norms the people had grown up with. According to these norms, family members were bound by emotional, religious, and legal codes to care for their families during their lives. The people were forced to abandon their loved ones to die on the roadside, or in huts, where the corpses were left to rot. By killing secretly, or by not allowing survivors to hold even meager funeral services for their dead relatives, the Khmer Rouge violated cultural and legal norms that required people to ensure that the dead received a decent departure from life. This was especially significant because of the belief in reincarnation among the Khmer. In pre-revolutionary Cambodia it was the respect for the living and the dead that made the people civilized, human.

How fast man changes! How fast he sheds his outer humanity and becomes an animal inside! In the old days--only six months before, nobody abandoned the dead. It was part of our religious tradition that if we didn't cremate or bury the bodies, and if we didn't pray, the souls would wander around lost. They would be unable to go to heaven, or be reborn. Now everything had changed--not just our burial customs but also all our beliefs and behavior. We had no more monks and no religious services. We had no more family obligations. Children left their parents to die, wives abandoned their husbands and the strongest kept on moving. The Khmer Rouge had taken away everything that held our culture together, and this was the result: a parade of the selfish and the dying. Society was falling apart (Ngor 1987, 185).

Two women suffocated to death in a truck packed with people. Their bodies were abandoned by the roadside by the Khmer Rouge soldiers. In relating this incident Pin Yathay echoes Ngor,

When they saw what was happening, the families of the two dead women protested, weeping. Traditionally, the dead must either be buried or cremated. The idea of leaving them there by the roadside was unthinkable, sacrilegious. . . Now we are no longer human beings (Yathay 1987, 73).

Not only did the Khmer Rouge kill, they also stole. They stole not only material goods from their victims, but also their lives and minds by denying them basic human needs. They carved out livers, breasts, and other human organs from live or dead victims for consumption. They removed fetuses from live pregnant women leaving them to die a slow, lingering death.

Although rape and other sexual misconduct by the Khmer Rouge soldiers was rare and usually done for

punishment, the victims of the regime were forcibly married to partners chosen by the regime, and denied relations with their own spouses through separations, lack of privacy, and lack of desire due to starvation.

The people were lied to, from the beginning till the very end of the regime. To enable them to kill with more ease, the Khmer Rouge soldiers consumed alcohol until they were intoxicated. Thus the regime violated all five Buddhist precepts, and instilled fear in people and caused suffering to them at every twist and turn. Through their words and actions, the Khmer Rouge completely desecrated the culture that had evolved over 2000 years.

It is also important to recognize that not only did the Khmer Rouge violate Buddhist precepts, but they also forced the narrators and other victims to violate them for sheer survival. The victims killed animals, stole food, and lied. Some enticed soldiers to engage in sexual relations, and then turned them in to other leaders, thereby taking revenge. Perhaps the only precepts the victims could not violate was consumption of intoxicants which was not available to them.

In recounting social, cultural, and religious violations committed both by themselves and others, every one of the narrators justified the actions as being acts of desperate need. The guilt and remorse they feel are

betrayed by their voices and words. Their eyes ask for forgiveness. In recounting the brutal acts of the regime, they cannot withhold their anger and tears. The memory of these horrors causes emotional depression, headaches, backaches, and other physical ailments, and sometimes nightmares. The tremendous physical and emotional suffering caused by the Khmer Rouge regime is always a part of life for the survivors.

Although the Khmer Rouge tried so hard to eradicate the former Khmer society and culture, they only succeeded in doing so outwardly. Inwardly, many victims continued to look towards their past for survival. In some instances mutual caring and cooperation became stronger. Even tiny creatures such as grasshoppers were shared among family members. Individual escape was not attempted because it threatened the welfare of other family members.

On an emotional level, anger at the Khmer Rouge kept families from giving in. Individually, they sought strength from Buddhist teachings of self-control and meditation in order to save both their own and their loved ones' lives. Although the regime controlled the actions of the narrators and other victims in every outward way, it could not control all of their thoughts. The victims adjusted as best as they could to the autogenocidal regime by relying on the religious and cultural norms they valued

before the revolution.

PART III

THE NARRATIVES

The narrators whose stories appear in this section arrived relatively recently in the United States, and are not fluent English speakers. As samples of their original narratives in the appendix illustrate, their original narratives in Cambodian English will not be easily understood by uninitiated readers, and therefore have been rewritten by me in a modified version of Cambodian English.

Since my intention in rewriting was not to correct English language mistakes appearing in the narratives, but to present examples of how Cambodians speak English when they do not know it well, the following stories contain sub-standard English, both in sentence structure and grammatical features. However, these features do not reduce the sophistication and complexity of the narrators' views and observations.

CHAPTER 5

MUM

'Mum' is an affectionate term commonly given to Cambodian girls. Twenty-two-year-old Mum's story describes a westernized family who also value the social norms of the traditional Cambodian society. This is also the story of a remarkable young woman who has suffered tragedies that seem insurmountable, but who has overcome them with an absence of bitterness or self-pity that is both touching and admirable. The story of Mum's mother appears in Chapter 6.

Early Years

I was born in Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia. I was the the youngest of four kids, and the only girl. I had lots of toys. I was spoiled. One time when I was about five or six years old, I went to my dad's friend's house. They had a teen-age daughter. She played the piano real well and I loved it. I wanted to play the piano. So my dad bought me a piano, and got me a tutor. So you know how spoiled I was then. My dad was a lawyer. I remember him wearing a gown and hat, you know how judges dress? I will get all excited when I saw him wearing that.

I slept with my mom and dad on the same bed. I always slept next to my dad, so I was used to having a dad next to me all the time.

We had a nice house. It had two stories and a garage. My dad had it built, so it was the way we wanted. I remember quite a bit about it. It was a large house, and we had gates around it. We had a TV. We got the phone just before we left our home. We had at least three cars. I remember we had a Mercedes before we left. We were quite well off then. Around the house we grew papaya trees, and a lot of other trees, fruits and vegetables. I remember having friends and neighbors, but I can't recall faces. We had three or four dogs. What I liked the most about the home was the upstairs, the second floor. My dad had someone build a little cottage for upstairs us with wood. I liked going up there, specially in the summer. At night time it was great! We had picnics up there, with barbecued chicken and stuff.

I was always with my brothers. We went to school together because we were about the same age. All of us were a year apart. We had to go to two different schools. In the morning we went to Cambodian school, and in the afternoon we went to French school. In the Cambodian school, girls had to wear blue skirts and white shirts, but I think in the French school, we could wear whatever we

wanted. Sometimes we had tutors in the house too. My dad was really pushing us to learn; all of us. We called our dad 'Pa', in the French way. He was really demanding of us, but at the same time he was nice. I was very young, but I was able to handle most of the things he wanted us to do. I was quick to pick things up, but not so good at remembering.

We called our mother 'Nya'. Nya is more like a fancy word. I don't know why we were brought up calling her Nya, but that's what we called her. My mom will have us do math or writing or whatever, and if we did well, she'll tell my dad. If not, she'll tell "So and so didn't do well," and he will come over and talk to us. "Why didn't you do this well or that well?" I felt scared because he happened to know I didn't do well. In a way I was kind of afraid of my dad, in a way I was not. I knew he loved me, but at the same time, I was so afraid of him without him hitting me, scolding me or anything. He hit the boys. He would use belts and things. My mom always joked that my brothers were afraid of his face. They probably looked up to him thinking he was a tiger or something. It never occurred to me that way. I never got spanked by him. I got spanked by my mother. I was a pretty naughty girl; she says I was hard headed. I believe I was. I had a mind of my own kind of. I wouldn't do most of the things she told me to do. I

would just cry, and then she would say, "I'll spank you." Before she spanked me I would cry anyway. I can't think of many sad things in Phnom Penh except when my mom spanked me. I hated it!

One sad thing I remember is one time my mom and dad got into an argument. So all of us decided that we will go with our mom. My dad couldn't take that, because he just loved the kids too much. He said, "Well, if you are all going with your mom, tomorrow you guys are going to start walking to school." We didn't have any grandparents or relatives living with us, just my dad's friend and servants. Usually his friend took us around. The school wasn't far. But I was so spoiled, I don't think I had ever been under the sun walking, that I got sick, walking to school. I got a temperature. And my dad never did it to us again.

Later on my two older brothers stayed in a French house, where they taught kids. They ate French food. They stayed there I think until the war started getting worse. We just ate regular Cambodian food. I think we had butter and stuff, but I don't think we ever had cheese. We had chocolate once in a while, because my parents, they had gone to France a couple of times, and brought over chocolate and stuff. I don't think I had ever tried cheese back then.

I am Buddhist, but I don't remember going to temple that often. I guess because of dad; he was doing a lot of things. He had a job, and he had a business besides that. I think he was into car business. I think that's why we always had different cars. We learned about religion from our parents. We would never really sit down and say, "OK, this is what we are supposed to do," but we would talk about certain things we did, and our parents would say if they weren't the right things to do. If we killed something little, or if we stole something, they would say, "You are not supposed to do such and such." Especially when I went to Battambang, my grandma taught me prayers. And she would tell us "If you did this, this would happen to you" and all that. Old people always tell you things.

I remember monks coming every morning to get food. I was so little, I don't remember how old I was, but I did something funny. Monks are not supposed to touch girls. So one time, this monk, he liked my brothers. So every morning my brothers would go out, and the monk would talk to them and touch their hair. I wanted him to do the same thing to me, so I went close to him. But the closer I got, the more he went back. Finally I started chasing him, and I started crying. My mom started laughing, and she explained to me why he would not touch my hair. I was so little anyway, and I had thought of myself as one of the

boys. I wanted to be like them, going out.

We never had birthday parties back home. We had heard of Christmas, but we had never celebrated Christmas. Just having the family around was great. I had friends in school, but I was rarely allowed to go out of the house. I guess my parents were afraid I would be kidnaped or something, I don't know. A lot of times my parents would have other kids come over to our house and play, because they didn't like us going to their houses. We had a big house, so there wasn't any problem. Once in a while my dad, I don't know from where he got these movies and projector, but he would show movies and invite most of the neighbors' kids to come over. We had the movies in the garage, and the kids sat on the floor and watched. It was great! I remember seeing Hercules. There were no voices or anything, just the movie. Once in a while they allowed me to go across and play with the neighbor's kids, but mostly I played around the house. It was hard having three brothers, because there were a lot of things I couldn't do that they could, like running around, chasing, and climbing trees. My mom would say, "You can't do that, because that's a boys' game." I was not allowed to do that stuff. But I did it anyway.

I had cousins, but they didn't live close to us. They lived in Battambang. I don't think I ever lived in

Battambang. I remember visiting there a lot. Battambang was quieter in a way, there were not many cars. A lot of things in Phnom Penh were better than in Battambang; more modern. I didn't like Battambang very much, except that I was more spoiled over there than in Phnom Penh. Even though we got to do what we wanted with my grandparents, I got to not liking being apart from my parents. I was not afraid of my grandparents at all. I was so spoiled, I was not scared of anyone. That's why nowadays when I hear my grandparents talking to my little cousins, I tell my mom, "You know, if they talked to me like that when I was little, I would never even have gone close to them." But I guess I was just spoiled.

My brothers teased me all the time. I think mostly it's just that they didn't like having me around, because if I didn't get what I wanted, I went to my parents. And they would come and say, "Why don't you give your sister this or that?" It would just ruin their game or whatever they were doing. So they didn't like having me around. I remember my oldest brother hitting me. Our parents would be away to eat or something, and only the kids and the housekeepers would be at home. One day my brother told me to go and brush my teeth. But I was scared of ghosts, so I wouldn't go and brush my teeth, and he slapped me. I just sat there crying.

I was always afraid of ghosts. I still am sometimes, if I watch a scary story or something; I don't know why. My parents didn't believe in ghosts. They always told us there was no such thing, that once you are dead, that's it. But. . . my oldest brother, he was good at telling stories. He read a lot. And my dad's friends that stayed over, they told us stories. I think most of them were folk tales. The only thing I really remember is part of a story: this lady was pregnant, and somehow she died. When you are pregnant and you die, you are really mean afterwards. You scare people at nighttime, you come back to haunt people. Your spirit will be meaner than other ghosts. That's the only thing I remember. But I had never seen a dead body until we were under the communists.

The Khmer Rouge Experience

I remember the New Year of 1975. I don't remember the previous years as much, but I remember that certain year, because a lot of times we got to play what we wanted, but that night we were told not to make so much noise. My parents wanted to hear what was going on outside the house. I think the older people knew there were problems. I didn't know about the Lon Nol-Khmer Rouge war, but I remember when bombs were dropped in Phnom Penh. I didn't really see people dying, but when my dad drove by, I saw

blood. He wouldn't let me look, but I would peek.

When the communists took over it was really a big change for me. I was eight years old. They got into Phnom Penh, and I think they told us to leave in the morning. But my mother's father had come to visit us, and for some reason there was something going on between my grandfather and my dad, and we didn't leave. So when the communists came to our door and said, "Is there anybody in the house? You had better get out now, or we start shooting," we got in the car and rushed out, as I recall, late at night. I have no idea what happened to our dogs.

We left with whatever we had on. We took nothing with us. First thing, we had too many cars, and whatever the key my dad could find, we just took that car. I think the rice we had packed was in the kitchen, and the clothes were in the bedroom. So when we left we didn't get anything. We had to drive real slow, because there were so many people walking. And then this communist came over and asked my dad if he wanted to go back to the house to get some things. My dad said yes. We got off the car and waited for him. My dad was afraid to take too much. Mostly he just took the food. This is as I remember.

We kept on driving slowly, I don't remember how many days or nights, and we ran out of gas. So we had to carry whatever we could. On the way there were some people

trying to make money too. If they had a pig or something, they would kill it and sell the meat, for cash. Or they will bring your stuff from place to place for cash. They didn't realize that soon money was going to be useless.

I can't recall who cooked at this time. Probably my mom or the housekeeper, we still had her with us. When we were in the car we slept in the car. Then afterwards when we got to the countryside, we slept in the houses they built. It was really disgusting for me. I had never lived in the countryside. I could smell the cows, smell the horses, and I had a hard time sleeping. But I was always with my dad, so I wasn't that scared.

After some days we got on the boat, trying to go to Battambang. But we ended up in another city and we met my grandpa's relatives. We stopped there just to get some supplies and go on to Battambang. But my grandpa said he was old, and he didn't think he could walk any longer. Because we didn't want to leave him by himself, we decided to stay there.

We stayed in a relative's house. She wasn't really our relative, she was like a second wife of some relative. She was the owner of the house. She stayed upstairs and we stayed downstairs. She didn't like us very much. One thing was the way we looked; we looked different, we looked better, of course. Even though we were under the

communists, it hadn't really been that long, so we still had a city look, I guess. I think that's how she saw us. And the way we were with our parents; we respected our parents unlike her kids, they never respected her. I think she didn't like that. She was extremely jealous of us. I was young, but I knew if somebody didn't like me. I think she told the communists that my dad was involved with the government, so they took him away.

It was dark. We had the communists around. I was sitting on my dad's lap, and he was telling stories, just being friendly with them. And then these two soldiers came with guns and called my dad 'Bong' (comrade), and said, "We want to talk to you about something." I was always with him, so I decided to go along with him. I wasn't holding his hand, I just followed him. They took my dad to the third or fourth house, and spoke quietly to him. I was scared. I was standing about ten feet away. I didn't know what was going on. When the soldier saw me he came to me and said, "You better go back home, your dad would be home soon." So I just ran home and told my mom what happened. And we all started crying. I don't think my dad realized I was behind him. I remember his back was facing me. It's so lucky they didn't take all of us, or that they didn't take me, because I happened to be there. I have heard that's what happened to most of the families. The kids

were all taken along. The next day we kind of searched around, but we never knew what happened to him, what they did with him. We talked to the guy who was in charge of the county. Usually they referred to themselves as our friends, and he said they just wanted to talk to him. I don't think my mom really tried to ask as much, because sometimes if you asked too many questions, they just took the rest of you too.

I don't remember ever talking to Pol Pot soldiers. My dad talked to them. They asked what my dad did back home. He lied. He would say he was a pharmacist and that he got some medicine with him. He even offered to give them some if they needed it. Usually back home you always kept some medicines with you, because you weren't going to doctors every time you were sick. He would try to be nice to those people, at least pretend to be nice. Of course those people probably never knew any medicine anyway, so what difference would it make whether you were a pharmacist and had medicine or not. It has to be our relative who told the communists because nobody knew us. But then, there was no justice anyway, because when somebody said something, whether it was true or not, they just took you. It's been years, but it hasn't been easy for me.

It was especially hard for us after he was gone. He kind of knew that something will happen to him. He taught

my brothers to fish. He always said to us, "If something happens to me, you guys take care of your mom." Usually it's the other way around. The mom takes care of the kids. He knew my mom did not know how to do anything. Whenever we asked our mom about dad, all she would say was "Don't worry about him. He will be back." I guess it was something she said to make us feel better. We kind of knew that it was never going to happen.

Two or three days after he was taken away the communists evacuated us from there. We had to take so many things with us, and we were so young. Pots, rice, blankets, whatever we needed. It was extremely hard with four kids and a lady. The relative we stayed with had lived there for years already, so she stayed. But the new people who came from the city had to go. I remember walking, and we went to a place in a jungle where people never lived before. We had to start everything from scratch, and we didn't know how. The kids were too young, my mom didn't know how to build a house. We had someone help us. Even though it was a place where you couldn't easily live, at least we had a house to go to. It was made with branches here and there, and bamboo. Oh, it hurt when I slept on it! I have got a real big mole on my back, and when I was younger, my dad always said, "Oh, you have got this big mole on your back, you need to always sleep on

mattresses." I never forgot that. When I was sleeping on the bamboo, I used to ask my mom, "Why did Pa say I would always be sleeping on mattresses?"

Then we couldn't own anything any more. We had to give up everything. Clothes had to be dyed in black. We smashed little fruits and put them in water so the water turned black. Then we put the clothes in there, and they turned black. My mom would go to work around where we lived. My two oldest brothers had to go to work far away. The communists came out and got you to take you to work. I stayed home with my third brother.

Every year things got worse. First we got rice, but then we went down to rice soup with very little rice and a lot of water. Or the communists used yam to make it thicker. I remember I told my mom that if they wanted me to beg for rice, I would. But nobody gave you any. They pretended we were equal, but of course we were not. Otherwise why were we skinny and they were plump? They were communists, so they could cook at home and eat at home. But I never cried asking for food. I talked about it "Mom, I wish I had this to eat! Why didn't I eat back home when we had so much rice?" It was so hard to feed me back home, when we were in Phnom Penh. I had to have someone chase me around and feed me. That's how terrible I was. And if she wanted me to eat more, she'd better get

the rice without me seeing it, otherwise I just wouldn't eat. Now I'd say to mom, "Mom how come I never ate back home? How come I never liked bananas, never liked beef, never liked rice? Now I am so hungry." I wished I could have more food, but I never cried. And we would ask our mother, "Why? Why was this happening to us? What is going on?" The only thing I remember her telling us was that life is like a wheel, it turns. It will never stay the same. It would get better. In a way we believed her. We didn't know any different. There was no radio, no lights, we didn't know what was going on. So, that was the only thing she could tell us.

I was with my third brother a lot and we would go and find mushrooms and cook and eat together. One day he found one, and I told him "This one looks suspicious." Of course we did not have books then, but there is a saying "If they are good looking mushrooms, they are poisonous." But I guess he was too hungry, so he cooked it and ate it. He came and said, "Oh, I got a headache, I got a headache." I was there with my mom, trying to grow some yams and stuff. He went to sleep and never woke up two nights and three days or three nights and two days. We didn't really know what happened. We assumed that it was mushroom poisoning. And this guy, he was supposed to be a Pol Pot doctor, he told my mom to get some leaves and stuff, boil them, and

give the water to my brother to drink. But my mom figured he was dead already, and she didn't even know what type of leaves to get. The communists gave us a bit of gasoline to burn for a fire, but instead of burning it, my mom just put it on my brother and coin rubbed (a common home remedy) him. Pol Pot thought my mom was abusing my brother and he scolded her, "What? I told you to get so and so." My mom was mad too, because we heard that if you got mushroom poisoning and if you ate a little bit of sugar, the poison would get out. So she went to this place where they make palm sugar, and asked the people for a spoonful of sugar. They were eating the sugar, but they said, "No." My mom told them, "My son had mushroom poisoning. Just give a little bit to get rid of the poisons." But they said, "We told you guys not to eat mushrooms, or you'll get poison. You don't listen to us. We don't have sugar to give you." So my mom was mad. I don't know what was going through her mind, but she didn't bother to look for the grass stuff. So Pol Pot thought my mom was abusing my brother. Anyway, the guy gathered all the leaves and told her to boil them and feed him the water. We kept feeding him, and he was peeing all the stuff, one after another. One thing was, he kept on breathing, but every day I could see more and more of the bones because there was no solid food for him. We boiled fresh vegetables for him, hoping he will get some

sugar, since it was fresh. Finally, one night he called my mom. He went, "Nya!" I was there, and my mom went, "What happened, what happened?" He said, "Oh my body hurts!" because of all the coin rubbing and stuff. We had a lighter which had not been used for years. There was nothing in there, and it never started. But that night, it started. It was incredible! My brother didn't remember what happened to him. Every time he would eat he went like this (Mum put her hand all over her face, groping for the mouth). He would take a long time to eat something. And my mom would yell at him "What's the matter with you?" I didn't know what to do, my heart just dropped. Mostly he was afraid of my mom. She didn't know his eyes were so bad. And he doesn't express as much. A long time after he recovered from the coma, he was just like a baby. He couldn't keep his neck up. Finally he was able to sit up. One day my oldest brother who was in the junior camp came to visit. He looked at my oldest brother and said, "Who is that?" His eyes were wide open. Oldest brother asked, "Don't you know me? Can't you see me?" He said, "No, I can't see you." He was almost blind. My mom was always massaging him, and he was always screaming and crying, "It hurts, it hurts." But what she did was the right thing for him, because if she hadn't done all those things he probably wouldn't have been able to walk again. Finally he

was able to walk with a crutch. Then my mom had to go far away to work. She had no choice. My mom took him with her, because she lived near the sea and there was a lot of fish. Not necessarily rice, but there was fish, so that helped a lot.

After my mom left I was supposed to be living with the other kids. They had ladies over there, in charge of kids. But a lot of times I ran away. I would come back to the house. There was nothing really there, but at least I didn't have to work for the communists. I looked around for food and fished by myself. I stayed in the house. I was also very lucky. Pol Pot ladies who did the cooking liked me. This lady knew my mom had to go away to work, and she left me a little cooked rice, or raw rice to cook by myself. In the kitchen they had some fire going all the time for the next day, and with a little piece of coal from there, I could start a fire. I cooked in the house. We didn't have salt; that's why most of us were swollen. But just plain rice was wonderful! Oh, god, I was so hungry! I even walked on dirt sites, where they buried people to find little fruits that would grow on them. I would feel a chill, get scared a little bit, but it was no big deal for me. I would walk on it anyway, and pick whatever I saw. I was so hungry. And now here I am, having enough food in my stomach, and I still have that scary feeling about ghosts.

It's just so strange.

I wondered why my mom never took me with her when she went to work. She said she wanted to take me, but just couldn't. And I knew it too. I knew she couldn't take me. It was no big deal for me. Everyone had to grow up. I did not cry, tears weren't really easy for us then. All we cared about was to feed ourselves. My mom and I had no way to communicate. I had to walk across a big jungle to get to her. I visited her twice. And the lady at the kitchen was nice. One time I told her I wanted to go and see my mom, so she asked this guy a favor. He went back and forth in a cow cart bringing fish and stuff to the place where my mom lived, so she told the guy to bring me to her. She gave me some rice, and told me to go with him. I also came back with him. But then I had to go and see my mom again, because I had a dream that my brother who was with my mom was dying. It's not something I will forget; it's hard for me to talk about it. I got scared. So I went there again. This time I went with another girl. We were in a cart on the way there, but when we came back we had to walk across the jungle with some other people. We had no problem walking, but we were so little, we couldn't walk as fast as other people walked. It started getting dark, and we were lost. All the other people walked so fast, they didn't care. They didn't know us anyway. My friend was crying,

"Oh, we are lost, the wolf is going to eat us." She got on my nerves. I was scared also, but what's the point of crying? Finally I recognized the trees where we lived, so we got back home. So it was hard for me to go back and forth to see her. The last time I went, it was just too much.

I have no idea how many years or months mom was away. We had no calendar, but it was a long time. But I was never out of food; there was always food hidden for me. One time there was this old lady, her children, her grandchildren, her son-in-law, all had died. She was the only one left and she saw me. She said, "If you come and stay with me we can be a team. I have some rice, and you can catch some fish, or find some fruit. That way we'll cook and eat together." This was a while after my mom had left. She hadn't come back, so I lived with that lady. And I was lucky, I got to sleep on a kind of a cushion! I don't know how she still had the cushion. She was one of the city people too. She didn't want me to come back to my mom when my mom came back. And I was young then. I didn't know any different. I didn't know what she was trying to do, but afterwards my mom said the lady wanted to keep me because she didn't have any kids or anyone. That lady was old, but smart. She talked a lot. She told me what I should watch out against, and not to tell anybody about

what we had to eat. I think she was a close friend of the cook, so she was always given extra rice, and it was wonderful.

When I was under the communists, I had three friends. One was the daughter of the cook, one was the girl who went to visit my mom with me, and the other one was Chinese. I remember the Chinese girl the most. What happened was we used to walk together to the school where the kids lived. The communists used to call it the school, but we didn't learn anything. One time the three of us and one of the Pol Pot's daughters walked together. For some reason my Chinese friend liked to talk too much. So she mentioned that she wished the Vietnamese would come and take over so that we would be free. I was shocked! I knew the Pol Pot's daughter would tell somebody, and my friend would get in trouble. She was killed. They killed her. They left her body in the back of the school, but further up. I was afraid to go and see her body. Luckily I wasn't killed too. I was there, and I heard it too. I had seen other bodies. One time I saw this lady. I think she wouldn't marry one of the communist. She was killed. I heard that before she was killed she was raped. And then they left her body in the rice field, and they tied the rice in a big knot, so people saw it. Her body was so swollen. Couldn't recognize who she was. Of course the body wouldn't be

there for long. When it started to smell, the wolves came and ate it.

People got punished all the time. I was punished once myself, because I stole some sugar cane. The communists grew sugar cane in front of my house. You have to have some sugar or you have cravings for it so bad. I had not had sugar for years, so I would sneak out and cut some sugar cane. I did that a lot, but once I got caught because I did it in the day time, and the guy who was in charge of the place saw me. He had an axe, and he hit me with the handle. I was hit in the back, on the butt, a lot of times. It hurt, but compared to what I thought could have happened to me, it was nothing. I could have been accused of being a thief, and been killed. They killed a lot of kids. They killed my friend. I was just extremely lucky.

Because of a lot of things I did, I could have been killed. A lot of people who did the same things got killed. I was always getting away with them. One time I had a fight with this girl. She came from the city too. She was a really mean girl. She would start saying something about my mother and I just didn't like that. I told her she can say whatever she wanted to me, but to just leave my mother alone. I think she was like half Vietnamese. Then you know they are really mean. I didn't

want to get into trouble, I didn't want to get killed. But she was just too much. One night I got so mad I started beating her up. So the ladies who were in charge of us came and started slapping us. They told us, "You are not supposed to fight. Only enemies would do that. You are Pol Pot people," and stuff like that.

I prayed a lot at night. My mom would tell us to pray what my grandma taught me. I prayed for my dad; that my dad would be OK, that he'll come back home soon. Of course we didn't want the Pol Pot spies to hear though. And those people were good spies! They were just like animals. They never made any noise. They had lived in the jungle for so many years, you would not hear a footstep. You would always think there were branches and trees that they might step on, but they would not make a noise. You really had to watch out.

I never fell ill during Pol Pot. Again I was lucky. If I was ill, who would have fed me? Who would have taken care of me? My mom was away. When I was living in Phnom Penh, I was exactly the opposite.

Escape to Thailand and Return to Hell

When we were walking back to Battambang after the Vietnamese came, my mother was like crazy. She was yellow and swollen, she was shouting at us, and my second brother couldn't take it. He was so angry. All the time he wanted

to go and kill the Pol Pot people. But my older brother and my mother begged him not to. We believe that we don't have to kill them, because they will be punished by Preah. Preah is somebody like God. So in the end he didn't go.

After we got to Battambang, we escaped to Thailand, to Nong Chan camp. We were all together. But when we got there, I don't know what went wrong with negotiations, but we were taken back to Cambodia. Nobody told us where we were going. The Thai people had given us rice and water. We were in a nice bus with air conditioning and everything. We were taken back to a mountain. Maybe they just wanted to kill us, I don't know. The mountain was like a wall. They told us to get down, and go back to Cambodia. People refused. Then the soldiers started shooting. So we ran for our lives. We climbed down trees to go to the bottom of the mountain. We were lucky because we were the third group that was sent down. There were mines buried along the way, and a lot of people were killed. So we figured, OK, there are people killed, so we should walk along where the mines were already blown up. That's why we survived.

The paths were only about two feet wide. You could not go to the left, or to the right. You had to walk where one of the leaders lead you to, and there would be traps and mines all over the place. And then we got to this place where we had to stop for a while. Oh, it was so

terrible, the dead bodies were in front of me. They were swollen so big, and I could see worms. People's skin is pretty thick, but in the daytime you can see the worms inside the dead people's bodies. And some corpses were all dried out. I don't know how many times they were killed. Sometimes we could see some people buried not so deeply. I kept my eyes closed, but I could still smell.

A lot of things happened there. Some people gave birth and they had to leave the babies and just take the mother along. For one thing the kid would cry, and robbers would know we were there, and also who could have taken care of the baby and the mother? Some people left old parents up there with some food because nobody could carry them. It's hard to carry people especially when you have a small path to walk along. One time we were walking along the day time and someone shouted, "Oh, a mine is going to explode! Bend down!" My aunt got hurt a bit and she got a piece of body, meat of people, stuck on her and she was screaming. I had never seen so many bodies, left like that for so long. Finally we were free to walk back to Cambodia, but it was terrible! I cannot remember how many days it took us to get out of that area. I only remember some of the things that happened. During the time we were under Pol Pot and during the time we were in the camp, I did not know any dates. Just day and night, day and night,

that's all I knew.

Second Escape to Thailand

We went back to Battambang. We stayed close to my uncle, and tried to make some money and get some gold, and give it (escape) a second try. We knew there was nothing for us in Cambodia. Whatever we had was destroyed. My mom didn't want to try to escape again. She had given up, but we begged her to try again. There was nothing for us. How were we going to live?

I had two uncles. My dad's brother, and my mom's brother. We were always with my mom's brother. He was nice to us, he was closer to us. The other uncle didn't care very much about us, I don't know why. I think it was just the attitude. Often individualistic, you know. That's how I look at it, but I don't know. As I was told, he was always like that. And he still is. He lives in this country. My mom's brother escaped with us the first time, and he did the second time too. He was the only family we had left. We couldn't depend on my other uncle and my dad's mom. We couldn't really depend on them.

The second time we escaped, we didn't have that much money left to pay the men who took us to camp. Since we could not pay, we could not get into camp together. We had to go in one by one with other groups, and we got

separated. Only my mom and oldest brother were together. I was taken by a man and a woman to live with them. They had a handicapped child, and they wanted me to look after the child. My mom found my brothers after a few days, but they found me after many weeks. I thought I had to stay with those people until my mom came, so I wasn't very worried. But it was a terrible experience for my mom.

Life in Refugee Camp

Camp was a lot better than in Pol Pot! We stayed in a small camp, with gates around it. We slept in a place like a warehouse, with just a sheet or something to sleep on. We slept next to one another. We had money to spend because my grandma used to send money to Thai friends or relatives, and they somehow got it to us (Mum's grandma was already in the United States). People also sold the gold they had and got Thai money. We couldn't go anywhere in Thailand to buy stuff, but there were Thai people selling stuff outside the gate. We probably paid three or four times the regular price, but, it was great! We could buy candy and stuff, and I could play again. I guess I was still a little girl. And I wasn't scared anymore.

And no more fleas (lice) for me. In Pol Pot time I had so much fleas. And the eggs, you could see the stuff. I could feel them with my hands. I could just get them myself. My mom didn't know how to do that. I could do it

for her, but she couldn't do it for me. But after we had soap in the camp, the eggs just came off. So with food and soap and stuff, it was great! And then we were quite excited, because the second camp that we were in, we were sure we were saved, that nothing would happen to us again.

I don't think we were in the camp for more than a year and a half, but I think my mom would have gone crazy if we stayed there a bit longer. Because everything suddenly changed for her. Before Pol Pot, she was a mother, but she was never a cook, she didn't have to do anything. She was always wanting to get sick, back in Phnom Penh. And suddenly she was in Pol Pot. She had to do everything. She had to work day and night, not getting enough food. By the time we got into the camp, she probably didn't care anymore.

In the camp we'd sometimes think it was better off being dead, than alive. Even when we first left Phnom Penh when we were in the car, my dad had talked about it. He just wanted to drive off the cliff with all of us, but my mom begged him then, "Things can't get much worse" and all that. And we talked about it in Pol Pot time, my mother and all of us. Sometimes we got to the point where we thought, "What's the point of living?" We didn't know what was going on around us, we didn't know what was going to happen to us. We didn't know if anybody would ever

discover us. We were all by ourselves. We thought maybe we should just eat something like poisonous mushrooms so all of us can die, so we didn't have to go through all that. Sometimes we tried to think of the positive side, the bright side, but sometimes we got to the point where we had enough of it.

We didn't kill ourselves because my mom always told us she wanted to see what would happen in the end. She had a belief that things would never stay like this. She said other countries wanted to go forward, we couldn't be going backward. She said life was like a wheel, it turns. It would never stay the same. In the refugee camp she was a little bit better, but I don't think she was sure of what was going to happen. And then we were interviewed about why we wanted to come to America. I think if she had stayed in that camp another six months she would have gone crazy.

Arrival in America

My grandmother sponsored us to come to America. I was really excited. I wanted to go to school so bad! We came here in a big airplane. I think it was a regular plane for regular people. I think we were the only refugee family on that. We came before my uncle because one of his kids had a broken leg. I had been on a plane before, from

Battambang to Phnom Penh, back and forth. I remember going to Battambang on a plane without my parents, with my third brother. We arrived in San Francisco and saw my grandma. My grandma brought us Cambodian food to the airport. Maybe she thought we didn't know how to eat American food. She also brought us apples. She couldn't drive, so she asked some other Cambodian people to take her to the airport, and that whole family came to pick us up. I was twelve when I came here, but I was so little. When she saw us my grandma said, "You guys did not grow the past four or five years." We couldn't, because we had been with the communists.

When we came here, we stayed in my grandma's two bedroom apartment in a big city. It was really a small apartment. I don't think more than three people were allowed to stay there. But we had no choice, and everybody was kind of hiding there. We didn't get welfare money yet, and we had no place to go. We stayed there until we got welfare money, and we moved out because we couldn't take the hard time the manager was giving us. Finally we started going to school.

I had a hard time at school. People would ask me, "How old are you? You are so small, you are in junior high school?" I was thirteen, but I was so small that nobody believed me. I didn't know how to speak English, and kids teased me. One time my brother was sick, and the teacher

asked me where my brother was, and I was trying to explain to her he was in a hospital. I cannot remember what the kid said, but he was a real jerk, and he made fun of me. He got into trouble for it. It really hurt and I started crying. But it taught me a lot. I worked harder to prove to them that I can do it too. That's just me. I guess I work better under pressure.

When we first started school we did not have a Cambodian tutor. A few months later the school got a Cambodian tutor. By then I knew a little bit of English, so I never really studied with a Cambodian tutor. In a way I am glad I didn't, because I've learnt faster that way. At first all four of us were in one school. Then after a year the oldest brother, because of his age, had to go to high school. But he didn't want to go to high school. He was crying saying, "I don't know English." He was so afraid he wouldn't catch up with the other kids. Eventually he did. For me it was easier because I started school in seventh grade.

The first report card I ever gotten was all B's. I cried. I had a best friend. She was a Chinese girl, who came here when she was little, and she spoke fluent English. She liked me a lot even though I didn't speak very much English, and when I was crying, she went, "Why are you crying?" She got mostly A's, and I got all B's.

But she had never gone through what I had gone through, and it was my first report card, ever. But after that I was getting all A's. My mom couldn't believe it. She thought I was cheating at school, because I don't sit down and read the books. I just go, da-da-da through the book before the test, and I am done with it. So she used to say "If you guys get one A, I'll give you a dollar." But then when we came home with the A's, she said, "Forget about the money," and we never got our money.

In school, the principal and the teachers really pushed us. I was doing great in junior high. I got 4.0. I was really popular because of my background and because of how much I had learned. I was in ESL for about one or two semesters. It was like every semester I was transferred to a higher level. I went through levels one, two, and three, and then I was in regular classes. I skipped levels four and five. I was put in with the American people. I had a hard time, but I guess I did well. Everybody recognized me. One day the teacher said I had to write an essay, so I wrote it. I was extremely surprised to be honored being a top international student out of the whole school. They picked ten people, and then six people as the best. Of course I wasn't the top one, but I was in the top six. It was wonderful! I got fifty dollars, and bought a record player I wanted so bad then.

I have no idea why I did so well in school. Probably it was the way the teachers and the principal pushed me. I still keep in touch with one teacher. She pushes me still. She thinks I can go further if I try. She says, "You have got to try. You have got a brain, you are wasting it. You've got to try." She is great.

After junior high school a lot of things were going on. My mother was extremely strict. She told me, "No boyfriends. If you have a boyfriend, I will kill you." I guess she just wanted me to be a good girl. She didn't want anybody saying anything bad about me. It was hard for me. My mom and I had never got along real well, since I was in Phnom Penh. I guess I didn't like her because she was always hitting me, and I was carrying that feeling along with me, so we didn't get along as much. Even after we came over, we still had problems. I think she was afraid that I would go out and have boyfriends and stuff like that, so I was married at the age of seventeen.

Love and Marriage

I got married when I was in eleventh grade. He was nine years older. I didn't know him. His parents asked my mom about me, and my mom thought that since he was a lot older, he would take good care of me, and that things would go fine. But he was the only son, and he was spoiled. His parents wanted me to do everything for him. He wanted me

to stay at home, be a good wife, help him with the business. He wouldn't do anything around the house. I had to cook every meal for him even when I went to school, and even have the glass of water on the table. He wanted me to do everything for him, and I am just not that type. I would do whatever was needed to be done, but to be like I was back in Cambodia, I just couldn't do that. I knew I had to finish high school. I thought even if I didn't want to continue school then, as long as I finished high school, I could go back to college later if I wanted to. I struggled to finish high school. I went to four different schools. It was almost impossible for me to deal with. I only wish I could have done better.

My husband and I fought a lot. He wanted to control me. He was abusive mentally and physically. He would throw my clothes downstairs when we had a fight, or he'll move out or lock me out. He was just too childish. I knew I could call the police on him, but I never did. I figured, what happens if things worked out in the future? I would never be able to face him knowing I called the police on him. He was also a gambler. My mom never knew that. She would say, "Your husband is in business. You guys should be buying a house by now, and so on." I never had access to his money. I had to work part time for him and he paid me \$3.50 an hour. One time he said, "OK, you

buy your food, and I will pay the rent." I was mad. I told him money is not important to me, I've been through a lot, and since we were married already, why don't we just work things out? I tried to change him little by little.

Finally things were kind of getting better. He was not the type that liked to discuss things, but I explained to him that if you are married you can't be listening to your family all the time. You can listen, but then think before you believe them. Parents always tell you things, but they don't know what's between us. Little by little he understood me, and he offered to give his pay check to me. But by then I had got to the point where that was OK. It never mattered to me at the beginning, so it was not going to matter to me now. I told him, "I just wanted you to understand me a little, and not always listen to your parents. I am living with you. You should understand what type of a person I am, what I do for you. I can be a good wife, but you have to help around the house a little bit." He started to help, but he wouldn't do it if his parents were there. But that was fine with me, as long as he would do it behind their back. Little by little I had the upper hand. His parents didn't like that. They thought I was taking control of him, and things got to the point where I was about to leave. Finally I said, "OK, what do we do to make things better?" He said he wanted a baby. He was

helping around the house anyway, so I said, "If that would stop you from gambling, I would have a baby. All I ask is for you to stop gambling. I don't want money or anything." He said OK. I got pregnant. My mom was so mad when I got pregnant. She knew the marriage wasn't going to work. She had wanted me to divorce him a long time already. But for me, I felt I had made a decision, by letting the marriage happen at the beginning. Now it was up to me to make it work, or at least if I was not going to be with this guy, to make sure that I was not going to have any feelings for him. So I gave it two years. I got pregnant, and he was still gambling. I told him, "Why are you doing this to me? Don't think that because I am pregnant you can get away with it. It's not going to work that way." I was never like this. All the things I had been through in the marriage made me an extremely strong person. He said, "Oh I need money, just one last time." I told him, "You have promised me so many times already. This time if you step out of this house don't expect me to stay with you. I'll move in with my mom." And that's what I did. He came back for me, but I said, "It's over." He started crying, "Oh you can't do that, you can't do that to me and my baby." I said, "If you had thought of that before, you wouldn't have gone gambling in the first place." I worked in a bank then. He was coming to my work place. I said, "Don't come

here. If I get into trouble or if I get fired you are going to hear it. I am going to sue you," which of course I probably could, or couldn't do. He begged me to come back. But I had enough of it and I did not cry any more.

I thought I was pregnant about two or three months. I was so skinny because of the pressures I was under. I never kept track of my periods because I never had them regularly. I said I was going to keep the baby and my mom tried to talk to me, but I didn't want to listen. Then she had other people talk to me, trying to explain why I should not have the baby. She said an abortion is not something she wants, she knows it's killing a child, but if I wanted to get married in the future who was going to love the kid if he was like his dad? So I thought about it for a long time; all that she said to me was true. Plus I was only nineteen years old, what happens if I wanted to go to school? I would have to take care of everything, financial things and the kid and everything. I made an appointment to get an abortion. It wasn't easy for me to decide to have an abortion, but I really had no choice. I think if I was older I probably would have kept the baby. It was an extremely difficult thing to decide. But by that time I guess I was under so much pressure, I had a miscarriage the night before the abortion. I am glad it happened that way.

I filed for divorce. I had medical bills to pay for

my miscarriage, because it was an emergency and I had to go to emergency hospital. My insurance wouldn't pay the bills because I didn't go to the hospital they had told me to go. So I didn't get a lawyer for my divorce because of the cost. At least \$500.00 it would have cost maybe, to do some paper work and make some telephone calls. My mom's friend who was in law school helped me with the papers. He hadn't graduated yet. I felt I didn't need a lawyer. I was never in law school but certain things you can ask and figure out. Like my ex-husband wanted me to pay half of his credit card bills and other loans. First thing, my name was not on any credit card. And it depends on what the money was used for, and stuff like that. The first time I went to get some paper work filled out I got lost and couldn't find my way in the courts. Then I met a lawyer, a really hot-shot type, but he was really helpful. He took some time, took me in his car and helped me with the paper work. He told me where I was supposed to go, and what I was supposed to do, which helped a lot. So I was married when I was seventeen, then the marriage ended two years later. I couldn't take it anymore.

I try to think back why I agreed to the marriage. Actually I didn't agree, I just said, "It's up to you, mom." I think I felt that somehow, my agreeing to the marriage showed that I was trying to do something for her,

because we had always had a terrible relationship. I wanted to show her that I really wanted to please her too. But it didn't work. His parents had spoiled him. He was twenty-six years, but he hadn't grown up.

I did not tell anybody about my marriage problems, not even a friend. For one thing, it was embarrassing. Finding somebody who was understanding was another. I was so young. Who would believe what I had been through?

I have a new job now. My present boss saw me in the bank. I didn't know him at all, but one time I went out to eat across the street, and he came over and said, "Can I sit with you?" and started talking to me. He banked where I worked, and he liked the way I worked. He said, "I've got a job for you. I know banks don't pay you much, I'll start you off at so and so. If you want to work, the job is yours. Just call me, here's my card." It was kind of weird. I told my girlfriend at the bank, and she said, "Give it a try." I came home and discussed with my mom and they thought it was a good idea to give it a try. So I went to work for him. The first two months I had a hard time because I did not have the experience. My boss kept on saying "You've got to trust me." It was hard at first also because of prejudice. Other people didn't want to tell me things, they didn't want to teach me. If they said something, I was supposed to remember forever. One time

was all they would tell me. It was like certain things they didn't want me to have, didn't want me to do, because they figured they've been there for so long, they deserved everything. I was the only Asian there, making as much money as they did, and considering where I came from, I didn't deserve it. The money, it's not going to make me rich, but I have plenty enough to get practically everything I want; maybe not a house yet, but everything else that I want, maybe a sports car or whatever. But at work we are all friends now. It's just that I know how they feel toward me inside. But they are so used to me now they like me. I have no problems right now, but at the beginning it was extremely hard for me, and I didn't need it. But my boss always looks after me. He often refers to himself as my father.

Reflections, Perceptions, Adjustments

All the things that happened to me, I never really regret. I never sit down and cry thinking "Oh this happened to me, and that happened to me." I think what they have done is to make me a better person. That's the only thing I could think of. I could have been a spoiled brat if I grew up back in Cambodia. I wouldn't know some of the things I know now. I don't know what makes me think the way I do, but I know that if somebody else was in my shoes, she probably would not have done as much. The only

explanation I have is, it's something I was born with.

I still have nightmares of Pol Pot time. A lot of times it will come unexpected. It doesn't have anything to do with if I've discussed about Pol Pot or if I am sad. Sometimes I would dream of Pol Pot coming here and that I couldn't run. It's really scary. The dreams are different. I would see my dad at different places, different times, sometimes back in Pol Pot, sometimes in this country too. One time I had a dream about him that really scared me. I dreamed that he died. I don't know if he was buried under where we lived, but his bones started coming out and stuff like that. And I started crying and screaming in the middle of the night, and my mom woke me up. I don't dream of my dad as much anymore, maybe one time in two months or so. I always see his face. I ask him why, what happened to him, where is he now, why did he look for us after all these years, why did he suddenly show up and all that. But he never talks to me. He is always sad. I never dream of him laughing or anything. I don't have problems during the day. It's only when I sleep and have nightmares that I have problems. I open up my eyes hoping this is a dream.

When I have nightmares I pray quietly to myself. I used to bring food to the monks when I dreamed of my dad, but I haven't done that in a while. I have so many things

keeping me busy. We have tried to find out what happened to him, but I don't think there's any way to find out. Only the Pol Pots would know what happened. We have heard all types of stories that somebody saw my dad, he was skinny, or whatever, but I don't know who to believe. Pol Pot does not bother me as much now. It makes me sad, it makes me cry at certain times. Gives me nightmares and stuff like that. But then, I look at it as an experience. But I am not like Americans. I don't take what I have for granted. There's more to life, more to families than money and stuff. To me, to have pretty close families is more important.

If Cambodia went back to the way it was, I am sure most of the Cambodians would want to go back. They like it better over there. They want to go back to eat the food they are used to, and do the things they used to do. Here they don't know how to speak the language well. I know I stutter a lot too. Specially nowadays, I don't know why, I catch myself in certain words. I was a lot better back then. I don't think any of my family want to go back to Cambodia to live. What we've been through was too much for us. I wouldn't go back. Probably I'll go and visit. I am not going to forget Cambodia, but I am just too scared right now. I don't think I'll be able to survive another war. I would probably commit suicide. I just cannot deal

with it. I am glad I was young then. I could deal with it more. But I don't think I can, again.

I want to go to school to be a lawyer, but it's not a good time. Everything is too fresh in my mind. Not just Pol Pot or what happened in Thailand, but also what I've gone through in America. This is the only year I haven't been in school. I've always been in school. I tried to make myself go, that way I will always have a bond with school. I won't forget about it or it would be hard for me to go back. But I haven't been satisfied with how I was doing. I don't expect 4.0, but I expect 3.5 or something good. I don't think I could do it now, I think it's going to take a little time for me to think things out. I hope to go back, but I don't know when. Part of it is also because of the job. My boss offered me a job I couldn't resist. That kind of stopped me too. A degree, it doesn't always guarantee you a decent job. It's hard to find a place where you make decent money and at the same time be able to trust your boss. So I am kind of in between, I don't know what to do.

At first, before I was married, I was really a nice girl. But with this guy, the only thing I could do was to tell the truth about everything since his parents didn't tell him the truth. Realities are, I was the only one who was telling him the truth. I got to the point where

everything came to him straight out of my heart. This has made me a stronger person. I don't regret what I've experienced, but a lot of the time, I hate myself for being too strong. I don't think a woman should be like that. A woman has to have some weaknesses in her. I think like that of every woman, Cambodian and American. A lot of women, if they don't feel like doing something, they wouldn't do it because they are women. The friends I have, there are times when they don't want to do something, when they make up stories, or pretend they are not feeling well. It's something I don't do. Even at work, if I have a grouchy week, I would tell them with a smile on my face, "Hey you guys, I have a grouchy week." Probably most of my friend would make up lies about it. In a way being honest, being open to people, pays off in the long run. I don't care if it's somebody else's business, but if somebody wants to know about myself or asked me anything, I wouldn't lie. If I don't feel comfortable talking about something I wouldn't bring it up, but if they ask me I will tell them the truth. My mom, she doesn't like me talking about my marriage and stuff like that, but to me it's just an experience, and I've learned from it. It's not something I asked for. I am not embarrassed to talk about it. If we were in Cambodia I wouldn't have rushed to a marriage because of the power my father had. Also, back home, we

wouldn't probably even look at him because compared to what I had then and what he has now, it isn't even close. It's a big difference. He wouldn't probably even consider talking to my family about me.

I don't think most Cambodians have adjusted well to this country. I think most of them are having a hard time because they don't try to adjust. But a lot depends on what type of backgrounds they came from. Most of them came from the countryside. What I can think of is, you need to have some education. I know some Cambodians who married so young like I did, but then I never gave up on school. They got married and had kids, and then they never really got a chance to learn. Again, coming from the background they came from, it's harder for them than for me. I've had a lot of things in my life, been taught a lot of things. Most of them never had a good life back home. They never had things I had. And at the same time, they are not giving themselves time to learn, to explore some of the things here.

My grandmother lives with us. We are completely the opposite. One thing that we are the same is that we are both stubborn. I am stubborn, but at the same time, I do listen. She does not. She doesn't like me going out on dates at all, and she doesn't like certain things I wear. She is extremely old fashioned. One thing is her age. A

second thing is, she lived her life back in Cambodia, and she has never gone to school, so it's different. I work, and I go around, go to school. So I am different. Even if I don't always agree, I listen, and I understand.

The people that came from the city, I don't think a lot of them have any problem adjusting to anything at all. The other people from the countryside, some of them want money. That's the most important thing to them, regardless of whether they have education or not, regardless of what happens to them. You really have to go to school to learn a little bit, to grow a little bit. To me, money is no big deal. Of course it's something you always need living in this country, but it's not something I've never had or anything, so it's not the main thing.

Money comes and goes. I think to me, the main thing is happiness. Happiness is to do anything that I want to do. To accomplish anything that I want to. I would be extremely happy if I could be an attorney. This is something that's going to bother me for a while. I know I can do it, but whether I am ready or not, this is the question. I don't want to go to school and not do well.

I don't think I have had any problems adjusting to anything wherever I go, wherever I am. But I don't necessarily do everything like other people do, when I am in my house. I wasn't born here, so why should I be so

Americanized? I still want to keep my own traditions, do things my way. Not a hundred percent of it, but as a woman, I still do. Relationships and everything else. For example, work around the house, I figure that's the woman's job, regardless of where I am. It's something my mom taught me. I know Cambodian women my age who don't know half of what I know, cooking and stuff like that, because they are becoming so Americanized. They are more dressier, or whatever, but to me it's what type of a person you are, what's within you that really counts. Of course I am not going to be dressed in rags or anything, but I don't have to be showing off all the time. My friends look at my closet and say "Oh, you still keep such and such?" Old clothes don't bother me as long as they are not torn or anything, as long as they fit. I can think of two Cambodian friends who are very changed right now. One of my girlfriends, we were in school together years ago. We were the best students back in junior high, and she was still a good student in high school. Now she is on her way to college. If you see her, you would think that she was probably born here, she is so Americanized. The way she talks, the way she eats, the way she acts, what she wouldn't do. She really disturbs me, but in a way I respect her because it's amazing to me that someone can completely change the whole thing like that. I could never

do that. She doesn't know how to cook, she doesn't know how to do anything. She's a year older than me, she acts like a kid. When we get together she is always fighting with my friends. I can't recall getting into an argument with any friends. If they believe in something I am not going to say "Hey, that's wrong," even if I didn't believe that. My friend would tell something like "I don't like this. It should have been like this, instead of that." I think everybody has different beliefs for themselves.

In a way I am very Americanized. In a way I am not. It depends on who I am with. If I am with Cambodian people I am a hundred percent Cambodian. I get along with older people and the kids. I can see that in a way the older people respect me, because of the way I am around them. I am talking about older people with teen-age kids or kids about my age. The kids are my friends, and the older people are also my friends. And with American people, I can be very Americanized. But I don't always do what they do, it's just the way I talk, the way I act, the way I dress.

Usually whatever my friends want to do is fine with me. It doesn't bother me. But I wouldn't want them to do what I want to do, because I am afraid they would not like it. They like to go out and dance and drink. I don't drink. I've tried it before. I didn't like it. It

doesn't make me feel good. It warms up my body. It's strange considering what I've been through, you might think I have to turn to something. You know how most kids are, when they have a problem, they have to turn to something. But I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't do drugs. All I see is that they are not going to make things better for me. They will make things worse, not help me in any way.

I don't date as much. I used to before. But then I don't want things to get out of hand. I want to have control of myself. I want to have my pride. I don't want someone to step on my pride. In a way I think it's stupid, that being an Asian woman there are things you can't do because you are a woman. I don't believe in that a hundred percent, but at the same time I wouldn't do something different.

I don't believe in going out with different people all the time, and I don't believe in living together. I think it's a cheap way of. . . . I figure if you have the freedom of going out with a person as long as you want, you should know after some years what type of a person he or she is. You don't have to be spending twenty-four hours a day to find out.

The most important thing I think in a marriage is to be understanding, and to be able to compromise. Nobody is perfect. It is hard nowadays in this country to find

somebody like that. Sex wouldn't be the most important thing for me. I wouldn't say it's not important, but that would probably be one of the last things for me. For me marriage is no big thing, for my mom it's a big thing. She doesn't want it to be too late. She doesn't believe in somebody living all by herself. I can understand that, but she hasn't been through what I've been through. So it's going to take a while for me to realize what I want, what I want in a man or what I want in my life. I don't think of marriage at all. I have been asked if I would marry so many times already, by people I go out with or people that are introduced to me by my friends. Maybe it's going to take a while for my type of a person to get over certain things. I sure have learnt a lot.

If I got married and had children, I think the most important thing to do is to talk a lot, explain a lot, what's going on in life, not to have any secrets between the kids and myself and my spouse. It should be like my mom and me. We have our differences, but at the same time, she knows practically everything that's going on in my life. Most of my friends find that difficult. They can't discuss or the family can't discuss. I find being able to discuss things very helpful. That's another reason I am able to stay home more than they can, because they have a lot of secrets. Sometimes their parents don't know what

happens to them. For me, I think it's better to get closer to parents, to talk a lot about things. But what my mom says all the time, I don't do. I do what I think is the right thing for me to do, if I can handle it. I think what is important is what is within you.

I would try to avoid getting involved with a Vietnamese man as much as possible. We've been always told of bad things Vietnamese tend to do that we wouldn't do. I find it true too. They say and do things regardless of consequences. I don't think I can marry an American because of background differences. For one thing they are afraid of girls. Afraid that the girls will get pregnant or at least lie saying they are pregnant, and that once they are married they would control everything. I find it stupid. Everybody is not the same. Especially because I am from a different background, they should at least give me a chance. We want anything for the marriage to work, for the husband and the kids to be happy, at least that's how I would want it. I wouldn't want just to control him. That's how they see most women would do. I hear stories about that all the time from men.

I've been asked to go to church, but I don't believe in that. We don't go to temple as much, but we believe in Buddhism a lot. I cannot think of a bad side to it. I think every religion, whatever it tells you to do, I think

it's always a good thing. I cannot think of anything that monks tell me that is bad for me. There are a lot of things I believe in, it's good enough for me. I would love to go to the temple whenever I get the opportunity, it's great. But then again it's hard for my girlfriends, they are different from me. I have Cambodian Christian friends. They are really into it. Whatever they listen to have to be in Christian tapes. Before they eat, they'll pray. For me these things are not necessary. Again what is important is what is within you.

At the same time if they are so much into Christian, why are they doing some of the things they do? So many go to church just to meet people, just to meet boyfriends. They try to get the opposite sex into Christianity but then it's not pure, they are not becoming Christians because they want to. It's forcing them because they have to do that to get married. The opposite sex should be aware that if you are not Christian you can't be married to a Christian and that they'll try to get you to become Christian. I like Buddha a lot because you can marry whoever you want. They never force you to get into the Buddhist religion unlike other religions. I hate it when people come to our door saying "You want to become so and so religion?" Oh, that really bugs me. I don't believe in that at all. I like Buddha because you don't have to go to

temple every weekend, if you go fine. Other religions, you have to go to church every week, have candles around, give money, pray, and all that. To me, it doesn't make me different. I don't have to show to anybody I am listening to Christian tapes or Buddha tapes or whatever. I don't have to show them I am into something, and turn around and do something else. But that's what most of my friends do. But then, Buddha doesn't require you to do so many things. I think it's what you believe in, what is within you, that's important.

I respect Americans, but I am ashamed of some of the things they do. I think kids have too much freedom. I think people have too much freedom. Parents cannot tell the kids what to do. Kids don't care about parents. Talking about people around my age, they do practically everything they want to: drink, smoke, go out, move out, or whatever. I see and I know a lot of people who do those things at work, at school, friends I meet here and there. To us it's something that we can't do, all of us in my family. I am going to be twenty-two soon, but I still don't do the things my mom doesn't want me to do. I will not get a sports car or I will not go out with so and so if she thinks it's wrong. If that's what I want and if she is stopping me, I would be upset about it, but I wouldn't do it just to be against her. It's something within me. I

would be upset about it, but I wouldn't go against the family. That's why I respect these people who go after what they want, do the things they do. I can understand them, but I am not able to do what they do. Maybe I still have a little bit of the Asian background in me. I don't think I'll ever be able to do that. I am still with my mom, regardless of some of the problems we have. I figure wherever you go you have problems anyway. So what if we have differences? I enjoy being around. My family is more important.

I have always thought of myself as a Cambodian. But the older I get, the more I realize I have a lot of Chinese blood, and that some things I do are different from what the Cambodians do. But I still think of myself as a Cambodian. I don't know why.

CHAPTER 6

NYA SREY

Nya Srey (lady of ordinary status) is forty-three years old. She had a traditional middle-class life style until her marriage to an educated, upper-class, westernized lawyer. She is unusual in the Khmer refugee community not only because of her social background, but also because she had travelled to the west before leaving her country as a refugee. Though this exposure to western ways influenced her outlook and adjustments in the United States, she continues to evaluate her adjustments by looking towards the traditional social norms of Cambodian society. Her daughter's narrative appears in Chapter 5.

Early Years

I was born in 1945 in Battambang. We were mixed-- Cambodian and Chinese, but I don't speak Chinese. My father was married before, so I had three older half brothers. Then I had my brother of the same blood (sibling), I was in the middle, then my younger sister. My half brothers lived with their mother. My mother was sick when I was born. At that time the Second World War had started and there were a lot of problems. I was breast

fed, and she didn't have milk. So I was sick a lot. I called my mother 'Mai' like the Cambodians, and my dad 'Pa' like the French.

My father, he spoke French more fluently than Cambodian. At that time we were a French Protectorate. When my father was young I don't know if he could have gone to a Cambodian school unless he went to the temple school, so he went to a French school. My father had a brother and sister, but they lived far away. I never visited them. My mother had one sister who lived near us. I never knew any of my grandparents. They had died before I was born.

I went to a government school in Battambang, a Cambodian school. Back then, when I was young, I learned a lot of French. But later on, every year they tried to teach more Cambodian. So people younger than I am, they learned less French. I liked school. There were only girls. I can say I was a good student, but not that smart, not intelligent. I had close friends in school, but I was always shy. My brother and I, we were raised completely differently, because he was the boy. He went out a lot, played around; he was not a scared girl like me. My brother also went to government school. We are Buddhist, but he did not go to the school in the temple. When people are poor, they go to live in the temple so they can get a free meal. That's what I believe. My sister was smarter

than me. She was more intelligent and stronger. She didn't get sick like me and she wasn't shy. I feel like she was completely different from me. I was scared to talk to people, and when raised old fashioned, I became worse. Even now, I am uncomfortable to go any place by myself, and I hate myself for being like that.

I was not afraid of my father, but of my mother, yes. My father always spoiled me. Everything I did was right. He always talked nicely to me: "Daughter, do this." He hardly hit me. But my mother spanked me. My mother liked my sister better. She always said my sister was smart, she was this, she was that. She said I was not smart because of the way I talked and so on. I think it was true. I was not as smart as my sister, but when she said that, I don't think it helped.

I don't remember having any ambition to be anything. I was raised very, very old fashioned, so I had no idea to be something, I mean working. But being a mother, a housewife, ya. Not only my mom, but most people at that time were very strict. Like I couldn't go out, I couldn't have a friend over. I just went to school, came back home, did the house work. My mom taught me cooking, taking care of money, taking care of the house. I went to the market to buy food. My house was close to the market. I walked there, maybe two or three blocks. We lived in the town,

and most of the time the helper came with me. My mother lived a Buddhist life, like you cannot kill any insect. So when I went to the market where they sold live fish, I could not buy that. I had to buy the one that was killed. She didn't even eat eggs--it had to be cracked before you bought it. We ate meat, we ate everything, but we didn't kill to eat.

In Battambang we did not live with other Chinese. We lived among Cambodians. I think we got along better with Cambodians than the Vietnamese because a lot of Cambodian people specially in town, were half Chinese, half Cambodian. There were very few half Cambodian, half Vietnamese people. The farmers were pure Cambodian. Cambodians, they had problems with the Vietnamese all the time. I really don't know why. Maybe because the Vietnamese, they looked to me like they were completely different--the way they lived.

I don't know how much you had to be middle class or rich, but I can say my parents were middle class, because my mom didn't have to work to get money. She owned a lot of rice fields from her father. She rented the land to people. At harvest time, she collected the rent and spent the whole year. People paid her in rice. She sold the rice to the rice mill. When my mom went to the rice field, she used to stay there overnight or five days a week at

harvest time. Sometimes I went there, so I got to know the farmers. I didn't work in the rice fields. I just played around. Her house there was fairly big. People didn't have two houses unless they had rice fields, like my mom.

My mom did not visit the farmers. They came to visit my mom. They always considered her as a higher person because they needed her. Sometimes they needed her for extra money, besides the rice field to work in. Sometimes she didn't charge interest. Instead they gave her a young girl, like a granddaughter, to be with her, to help her in the house. Most of the time she didn't charge a lot of interest because she is really a Buddhist, and she believed that it was very bad to charge people a lot of interest. My mom owned cow carts, but not a lot. She always paid the truck to bring the rice to the mill. I don't think she owned a lot of carts because she felt bad about using the cow so much. She didn't want to use the cow for the rice field, and also to pull the cart. She was nice. I understand. Over there we didn't have the truck to do all the work, we always used the cow, and used it too much. I feel the same way as my mom.

I didn't have a happy childhood. My parents never agreed on anything. They didn't get along. They did not shout at each other, and my father did not hit my mom. My father was not that type. Much of the time they just kept

quiet. They did not talk to each other. I was so young, and I always felt sad and uncomfortable.

My father was a politician and worked in Phnom Penh, so they had two separate houses. He didn't have regular work every day, so he stayed home most of the time. My mother always went to the rice field if my father was home. She went there for a long time, two weeks or something like that. Left me alone with my father. Since they didn't get along, she didn't care. My father was more affectionate towards me than my mom. My mom, I know she loved me, but she was not the affectionate type of person. She didn't show, she didn't say, she didn't really get close to anybody. She would have been better being a father instead of a mother.

Sometimes I wanted to go to the restaurant, eat out, to see the movie like everybody else, but my mom didn't go. My sister was too young, my brother was always playing by himself, and I couldn't go with the helper. How could I go? I couldn't go alone. Once in a great while I went with my father, or my aunt took me there. My mom, she didn't have a happy marriage, so we did not have a happy time at home. She lost her mom when she was born, and lived with her stepmother. I don't believe she had a happy life. My brother became a farmer. He worked in the rice fields. He quit school after something like high school.

When parents have a broken marriage, it affects the children. That's why he quit school. If he did something wrong, my mom would say "He did something wrong," and my father would say "Oh you don't know how to take care of him," and so on and so on. Then my father took my brother with him, and later on my brother said, "No," and came back to my mom. So how can he learn like that? I hate that. When parents don't get along or separate, it affects the children.

Love and Marriage

I got married real young, when I was sixteen. When you don't have a good time at home why should you want to stay at home? That's why I don't feel bad I got married young. He was twenty-two when we got married. He was related to my mom, so it's kind of I knew him, and kind of arranged marriage too. My mom said a couple of people asked about me for their sons, but I didn't say anything. I liked my husband at that time and I don't believe my mom would have forced me to marry someone else.

I wasn't supposed to go out with my husband before I married. I did sometimes, but not secretly. We went out in a group--my husband, brother, sister, everybody. But I don't think it was good to go out at all in that time. In our country you don't see people date but my husband used

to have a lot of girlfriends before we married. I knew that too. But I didn't care. Why should I care? Girlfriend and wife were different, specially in our country. I did not know about sex before I got married. My parents did not tell me anything. They expected the guy to know. My husband knew. His father told him. But nobody told me anything.

My husband studied law. When we got married he had just finished something like high school. After that he went to university in Phnom Penh. I lived with him. My husband was in law school for five years. In our country people didn't have to take a bar exam to be a lawyer. There weren't many educated people because it was an underdeveloped country. When you finished school you knew enough.

I got married to my husband and he loved me. We got along. Two hours a day he taught French in a private school, then he went to the law school from four o'clock to eight o'clock at night time. I stayed home and cooked and took care of everything. When he came home, we just talked and I helped him with the students' tests sometime. We went for a drive every week-end and ate out every week-end. I had a really good time with my husband. He had a nice personality. He was a happy guy. He was very smart, not shy like me. That's why my first son and my daughter are

very intelligent. My husband was nice and polite in the way he talked, the way he acted. He was very kind to people. For example, if he had a car and he met a friend on the way, he would give the friend a ride. Not everybody offered to give people a ride.

I can't say I was rich when we were married, but I had a good life. We had enough to spend to have a good time. At that time I didn't think I needed to save any money, because I could see later on we were going to be rich. My husband would have a good position in the government. I didn't really worry about anything. My mom was rich, and I could have asked her for any money I needed. She didn't need that much money for herself. My father paid the rent for me the whole year. My mother sent me food, like dry fish, and specially rice. We never bought any rice. She sent 100 kilograms by car, or by train. I never paid her for the rice. She didn't need it. She didn't need anything from us. It was the way in Cambodia, most people helped their children. And I think that's the way she loved us. Always took care of us. She had nobody, only one sister from her own family, and the children. Even her own husband she didn't get along with.

After marriage I got pregnant right away. I was young, and my husband was young too, so we didn't know about contraceptives or anything. In the old days nobody

taught you. They had clinics, but no family planning. If they had family planning, I really didn't know about that. Maybe they had. Anyway once a year I had my children. I had them in hospital. They were born in 1963, 64, 65, 66. Then I heard people talk about the IUD. After I had my fourth one, my daughter, we went to a doctor. He had just finished school in France, and I went to see him and asked him. I used the IUD after I had my fourth child. My husband had no objections because we had four children. That was a lot.

When I had children my mom did most of the work. The first one, when he was born I breast fed him for three months. My mom sent me a helper. Then she thought I was too young, and she was afraid I didn't know how to take care of the baby. So she took my son with her. I stayed with my husband. I did not mind when my mother took my son to Battambang. Maybe I was too young, and I really didn't feel like I loved him that much. Then I was pregnant with another one after three months. I was not happy to be pregnant so soon, but I didn't know what to do about it. It's a big sin for Buddhist people to have abortions. Anyway, I didn't care that much, because my parents helped me. We always exchanged babies. When I had my first one, when he was three months old my mom took him with her. Then when I had the second one, I exchanged him for the big

one. She took care of the small one.

My husband really spoiled me. He gave me all the money and we spent it together. I could have anything I wanted. We went to Europe two times. The first time he went for law training for three months. We were in France, and we just went out, looked at clothes and things in the stores. And we went to Holland, and Switzerland, a lot of places. But we didn't go to England or Germany. My children stayed with my mom. She loved to have them. She was not strict with them. They were small though, just two or three years old. She spanked them sometime.

The second time we went to Europe we went to Paris for two weeks and to Geneva for two weeks. We went in 1974. He really didn't want to go a second time, I was the one who wanted to go. I said, "I had a good time over there, so I want to go again." So he said, "OK, I'll try to get the chance to go." He went for an International meeting. They asked my husband if he wanted to work in Geneva. But he said, "No, I miss my mother." His parents lived separately too. His mother lived in Battambang. His father lived in Phnom Penh. They were just like my parents. That's how I understood why my husband felt he didn't want to leave his mother alone. His mother brought him up. So we came back in December, before Christmas. I remember, because people asked me to stay for Christmas

time. I didn't want to stay, because the country was having a lot of trouble by then, and I had all my children in Cambodia. I just wanted to take a vacation.

When our country had war during Lon Nol's time, the people were scared. Nobody wanted to go out even to the movie; you never knew if there was a bomb in there. Sometimes you didn't even go to the market. We knew the country was in trouble. My husband was one of the young intellectuals. He didn't like the way they ran the country. He was in an intellectual group, but not against the government. He went to a French school, but in Cambodia, not in France.

During war time Battambang was quieter than Phnom Penh, so I left my children there. I stayed in Phnom Penh. My husband asked me if I wanted to go to live in the countryside, but I said, "No, I don't want to leave you alone, I don't want to go any place without you." I was in love with him. I couldn't leave my husband. I don't remember having a happy life when I was young, but I really had a good time with my husband. When all the children were like three and four years old, and the country was in trouble, my husband wanted to have all of them at home. So we took all of them to live with us in Phnom Penh.

The Khmer Rouge Experience

The day Pol Pot came to Phnom Penh, we tried to stay

in the house all night. Early in the morning we were going to leave. But right before we went to sleep, the soldiers came in front of the house, shot a couple of guys, and said, "You have to leave the house, otherwise we are going to kill you." It was very sudden. Before communists came I kept asking my husband "Are you afraid of the communists?" He said, "Oh, I don't care that much, I am not afraid. I am not one of the corrupted people. I believe they need educated people to build the country." He never thought they took over the country to kill all the people like that. He thought maybe they will try to brainwash the people, change the government to be clean. That's what he believed. Otherwise we would have left the country, everybody. Then all of a sudden, we were evacuated out of the house. I really feel so bad. I hate to think about that.

Khmer Rouge told us to leave for three days, because they were afraid that American planes were going to drop the bombs. We just went out of the house. We didn't bring anything. On the way, we saw people bring everything. I told my husband "I don't know, I didn't bring anything, not even my jewelry." He said, "Oh, don't you worry."

We took the boat across Tonle Sap (a big river in Phnom Penh), and stayed in a place where my husband had relatives. One night the communists just took him away, to

kill him, or to put him in jail, nobody knows. I was in another part of the house. I didn't even see. But my daughter, she was very quick. She was really very close to my husband, and she went after him. She heard her father ask, "What do you want from me?" and the soldier saying "We just want to talk to you." They took him to a house near our house, and one soldier saw my daughter and told her to go home. I couldn't do anything, say anything. The next day I had migraine. My head was about to blow up. Lucky enough they didn't want the whole family. In so many places they took the whole family.

We were evacuated again a couple of days after my husband was taken away. We were sent to the jungle. The regime wasn't that strict yet. It became stricter little by little, and my two big sons were taken to a different place. The two little ones and I, we were together. I had to work every day. We were starving. The hardest thing is, when you are starving, you can't do anything. You eat anything you find. We thought about food, dreamed about food. I survived because of my children. My older one who was in junior camp, when he came home, he taught his brother to catch fish. My daughter went digging for food. Sometime she dug for lotus flower root. Everybody helped me, helped each other to survive. At night my daughter was so hungry she couldn't sleep. She went out and caught

grasshoppers, or a frog. We had a little fire to keep us warm. She cooked the frog in the fire. She will have one leg, give me one leg, give her brother one leg. Sometimes the children stole some rice. My son ground it, my daughter winnowed it with her hands. Oh, we were so hungry! And my third son lost his sight to the communists (See account in Mum's story, p. 100). I lost my sister. She finished high school and went to University. She studied Chemistry to be a pharmacist. She studied two to three years and the country fell. We all separated. I think she was killed by the communists. It has been a long time. If she is still alive, we would have heard about her. But we never heard anything, so I assume she is dead. I lost two half brothers in Cambodia too. One son was beaten so bad by the soldier, he still has scars. They used bamboo sticks. I was beaten on the body by the woman boss. I felt angry when I was being beaten, but I couldn't do anything. I felt mixed up--anger, revenge, but I was worried. I only wanted to keep myself alive, to bring the children out of the country. They were still too small. I didn't want to die. I wanted to survive.

I had to hold on to some idea to survive. What's the good if you think "Oh, I am going to die?" I had to be optimistic to survive. I didn't want to give up to communists. My oldest child always asked, "How can I get

education? I miss school." I would say "It's going to work out." So he asked, "When, when?" The way the Communists treated us, no way. I knew there were Cambodian people in the United States. I believed that they were going to do something. How long it would have taken I couldn't tell, but we could not have communists for ever. The way they treated us was so horrible. If they changed things a little, told you to work more, not get rich, it would have been OK. But not treat you like animals. I think I survived because I was so angry. I also wanted to feel I was the winner. And I always expected to see my husband. At that time I never thought he would be killed or that anything happened to him.

Then we heard a rumor that Vietnamese were coming, so we just waited for our time. I wanted to see the Pol Pots' faces when the Vietnamese came, but one morning I woke up, and all the communists had run away. There were only a couple of families left. There were no more communists, so we just walked out. When I came out of the communists, my mind was crazy. I couldn't think well, I couldn't remember well. I was swollen. I looked really fat. My tummy was so big, but I was so hungry! The way we had been through was so horrible. If it didn't happen to me I don't think I could believe that. It's too much to believe.

When the Vietnamese came we were pretty far from

Phnom Penh. I never even thought of going to Phnom Penh. The first thing in my mind was to get away. Who knows when the communists will come back? I never considered living in Phnom Penh. We went to our home town, Battambang. I met my brother. He said, "I am fixing my bicycle. As soon as I fix it I will go to the border." So we waited for one day, the next day we went to refugee camp. It took us one or two nights to walk across the border. I don't remember.

Arrival in America

My father was with Pol Pot for four years, like me. My mom, she didn't stay with the Pol Pot. She left right before the country fell. It was lucky for her. She went to Thailand with her sister to see the doctor, and she got stuck there. She couldn't go back. My aunt's husband died in Cambodia.

In Thailand my mom tried to do a little business just to survive. She also used to help a lot of friends and relatives in Thailand. So they helped her, gave her a little money sometimes. She had a hard time in Thailand because she was not Thai. She didn't have a Thai identity card, and later on the Thai became strict. They were afraid of the refugee flow from Cambodia. So after four years my mom got to a refugee camp, and her friend sponsored her to come to the United States. After she got

to the United States, she got a letter from us; we were alive, me and my brother. She couldn't believe I survived because though my mom didn't spoil me, I didn't have to work so hard like in the communist time. Plus my husband was a lawyer, so she thought maybe all of us died in Cambodia. Then she sponsored us. When we came to San Francisco I was crying and so were my children. But my mom said, "Why are you crying? We are together again." I have never seen her cry. Believe me, she is a real strong woman.

When I first came it was very hard. I came alone. I came with bare hands. The Buddhist monk helped me a lot. He brought me a lot of clothes from Goodwill. I didn't speak English at all. I learned English for just a month or so before the country fell. I went to a private class but it was just a fantasy; my husband let me do anything I wanted. I learned the word 'water'. That's all I remember. I couldn't understand even a word when I came. The most important thought in mind at the time was that all my children could go back to school. I didn't know about welfare benefits before I came to America. I don't think anybody knew. At that time, the first thing in mind was to get away. After I came here I felt I liked America better than France--this is a richer country with more opportunities. There are a lot more people in France. It

is overcrowded.

When I came everything was different. I just wanted to learn to be able to live in this country. First I wanted to learn English, then do something for a living. I kept changing everyday, little by little. First thing, I didn't want to live in that big city with all the black people, poor people. It was not good for children, that area.

I went to adult school. I learned English for about a year or so. I was on welfare. I couldn't stand to be on welfare. I didn't want to go out and spend food stamps. Do you think it feels good? No way! First I learned English and then I studied computer data entry. I worked for a while in the big city. It paid pretty good money six to seven years ago. But it had too much pressure. My boss was an Asian and she was too bossy. American people are not bossy. Then I was laid off and I moved to a new city, but it was a very bad area. There were a lot of black guys there, drinking. My son's bicycle was stolen. So I kept moving. I moved to a small city and tried to buy a house there, but couldn't afford it. I worked so hard, ten hours a day, for two or three years. My children came home from school and cooked. We still have to work hard. I like to work, as long as they do not treat me bad.

My first son, he is very ambitious. When we came he

was in junior high. But my mom didn't know his birthday, so he stayed in junior high for only three months, and he had to go to high school. At first he cried. Then he got all straight A's after two or three months. When he went to college I didn't want him to be a lawyer like my husband, because I think that's why my husband got killed. I wanted my son to be an engineer, but he said, "I want to be using my mind," and changed over to business. My son read the business news in the news paper and wanted to keep up with everything. He said, "Why don't we move to this town?" We moved in 1982. Sometimes he pushes me too hard, tells me to wear make-up and so on. It makes me angry and then we have problems. But I really care about my children. I never thought about myself in all these years. I think I should now, before it's too late. I should think specially of my social life. That's what everybody, even the monks, tell me.

Reflections, Perceptions, Adjustments

I had a hard time learning English. The Cambodian language has a lot of vowels and consonants. I feel when you speak English you use your tongue a lot. I know more words than I can pronounce. I know French, so if I hear words like 'amputate' and 'intellectual' which are similar to French, I understand. I like to read a lot. Knowing French helps, but I have no time to read. I speak to my

children in English. But my aunt, every time I speak in English, she says "You don't know how to speak Cambodian any more?" She doesn't understand how I feel. It's not that I want to forget Cambodian, but I want to learn English, and the children correct me. I also think it is important to keep our language. We are not American, we are Cambodian. I wish I can speak English real well so I can speak it like my own language. But it's very hard for me because I am getting old. I don't have a husband, and I have to do everything by myself. I think with a husband you just work, and come home, and cook. I have to take care of everything; payments, paper work, cooking, house, and I have an old mother at home. Always I have something in my mind. I don't have much time to study.

My mom is alone in the home, and with everybody gone all the time, it is too boring for her. She is old and sick, and she can't even go out of the house a little bit because she is afraid she will fall. She can't even go to the temple. My aunt, she can't walk that far because her knee hurts, but she's a lot better than my mom. My aunt helps me a lot. She helped me financially a lot of times, like when I bought this house. She helps me to take care of my mom. Five days a week she stays with my mom to keep her company. It's very hard for old people to live in this country. It's hard for me, but it's very hard for them

because they don't speak English. When you get to seventy years old, I don't think you can learn a foreign language. My father, he knew a lot of French, but he couldn't speak English. He couldn't learn English. Maybe he could read and understand, but he could not talk. It's very hard for them.

Some Cambodians are very old fashioned. They are still like the Cambodian society in Cambodia. I found out I am different. I don't go out with many Cambodian people here. I think I have a different mentality. I have one or two friends. We can talk the same way. I think I am from a different social class. Also, I went out to other countries. The first time I went to France, it opened up the space for me. I felt I had to learn a lot. I want to go back to Paris with my daughter. My second son works six days a week. I always tell him to go out. Just going to work, coming home, and making money is not enough.

I think America is good. Everything in this country is good for my children to learn about, but everything depends on how you act. It's important to be nice to people, the way you talk to people, treat people. But the most important thing is to be honest. Money is not the most important thing. Money is important, but education is more important. Before, I used to think education was better than anything else, but now I am not sure. This

country has kind of confused me. If you do good business and have a lot of money here, that's good too. I don't want my children to be very rich. But they should be happy. Have a nice family, get along, whenever they marry. Not like American people; they always divorce, separate. In Cambodia divorce was not common. Even when the husband died, the wife hardly married again. It was legal to have two wives, but it was not common.

My daughter divorced. But at that time I didn't know. I don't have a husband. They don't have a father. I didn't have a job. My mother and father were here at that time. They put a lot of pressure on me about my children. I don't have a husband, why keep my daughter for so long? My mother used to be bossy and tell me what to do. But no more. We had a big talk after my daughter divorced. I told her not to be involved with my children, not to run my life. It just happens now when I am upset with things, I am upset with her. The best for her wasn't the best for me. So I am closer to my children. I am like a friend to them. We talk and discuss things. Still, I want to show affection to my mom, but I can't. I feel sorry, but I can't do anything now. I wasn't strong enough to do what I should have and wanted to do. I changed a lot. Now I do what I want to do. I feel I should have the right to do what I want to do. Therefore I feel I am

different from other people. Maybe I have more modern thinking. I am more westernized. Maybe I am stupid, too proud of myself or something.

Dating is OK with me, but I don't want the children to have a real close relationship unless they are sure. I don't like them living together without marrying. I don't like most white girls. They don't know how to cook, how to save money, how to care for family. I don't blame them. We have different customs. I feel we are completely different. We like to take care of our families. I would like a good Cambodian girl for my son, but it's what he wants. Before they get married, I like them to meet people. I do not want to arrange marriages all the time.

In a way I want the children to be like the Cambodian people too; not dress like a punk, cut their hair funny, not exaggerate things. I want them to try to learn, go to school, get a degree. That's what I try to tell my daughter. So far they have been pretty good, compared to other children. They know how to take care of themselves. Compared to American children, my children are more mature. That maybe the good thing they got from communism. They take care of themselves and so far they haven't given me much trouble, getting into big trouble. We disagree about normal things. They know what to do and how to make money. They know they have to help me. Like the big one, he

always managed to earn. He has money and he gives me. The second one has no degree, but he maintains job. He gave me money to buy the house. I feel sorry for the third one. He is very nice, but doctor says his optic nerve is damaged. They can't do anything. I took him to many doctors.

I think our country fell because of too much corruption. I think everybody knows about it. The president or Sihanouk had to do something about it. First I blame Sihanouk. He was the king, but he didn't do anything, did he? Corruption affected us too. Even if you had a good education, unless you had connections, you couldn't get a good position in government. Over there, the Royal family was very powerful.

I thought I got over communism, but I haven't. Every time I read a book about it I have nightmares. Two years ago I read a book about communist for the first time, and I had nightmares. Next time I tried again, it was the same. I couldn't believe myself. It was so real, how people were after evacuation. The patient in the hospital--I still remember I saw an amputated guy dragging himself on the road. It's still in my mind. One day we had a thunderstorm. I was sleeping, but it was like I didn't sleep. I felt I was in my country, listening to the rockets. It was same sound, you know. I couldn't go to

work the next day. I called in sick, and stayed at home. When I am awake, it's all right. Daytime it's OK.

Once a year I go to the temple and give food and money in the Buddhist way (Chapter 4). I really want the children to go to the temple. They go with me. Right now, I have changed a little bit, but I still believe in the Buddhist way, about karma, like what you did before, you will receive. If I did something bad in my last birth, then I have to suffer. So it has also helped me not to go crazy. I know some people who lost their minds. They were Buddhist too, but I don't know what they believe in. It depends on how far you can control your mind. When I was young, I tried meditation. My mom did that. She taught me also to just stay still, put your mind on one thing. I think it helped me to control myself a lot in every way. Remember Buddha said to always control yourself, not to be too happy or too sad. I am not very good at all at meditating. I hardly have time now.

I would like to marry again, but it's hard to think of a second marriage. I don't meet any Cambodian men. A lot got killed, and also I am too picky. First time when you are young, you are not worried if you will get along. Second time you think of everything. Also, an Asian man will make me think of my husband too much. My friend asks me "Why you don't want to go with Vietnamese, Asian?" No,

I think I live in America. I want to know these customs. It's hard to be with somebody when you have been alone for so long. It's been a long time--thirteen years I have been separated from my husband.

I feel alone here. I have nobody to count on. It really hurts me sometimes when I can't get any support or help when I am alone. I don't want to be a burden to my children. I really don't care if I had my husband. Since I lost my husband, I have made myself stronger. I can do my work--I have never done that before. It's still very hard. But it's not going to be like before again. Since we had communism, I don't want to be Cambodian. Why should I want to be with those people, those crazy people who killed my husband, my sister, their own flesh and blood? I just feel bad, sick, and tired, and it's not great to be like that.

When my children were young, I felt I was important. But now they are big, they can take care of themselves. They have their own lives and I feel I am not needed. In Cambodia I didn't need to work. I had my husband, I had everything. My husband spoiled me a lot. I feel so bad, why I lost him. I never thought I can be by myself. I had a really good time with my husband. Unfortunately it was too short for me.

It's about time for me to go out and know a little

bit more about the American society. I find it easy to go out with white men, but not Cambodian men because I feel I will betray my husband. I feel guilty. I hope to find a good man I can marry, so I don't end up like my mom, a burden to my children. It's not that I don't want to look after her, but she is always on my mind, something to worry about.

What am I doing besides housework? I don't know anybody. It's harder for me because I want to forget the past. I want to become like Americans. I want to start all over again. I want to forget my husband. But I feel shy. I don't speak English well. I feel shy about having conversations with people. I don't know how to act, how to have a social life. But I want to learn. I don't know how to dance. I can't even learn how to dance, start conversation with people I don't know. As a woman, I think even if you wanted to, you cannot chase a man, the way a man can chase a woman. Even in this country with equality, I don't think you can be equal in that. I would like to find somebody who can understand me, who is like me. I don't mind if he is old or poor, but I want someone I can get along with. I don't think it will happen, I am just hoping. I am not sure I can live with another person again after being alone. I don't trust myself.

I feel angry with myself, I don't know why. Why

can't I be like other people? I have to change. The American people go out, have fun, and forget what's on their minds. You don't have to worry all the time. Why not just have fun sometime? It's better than staying home and feeling sad all the time. I had a bad idea of going out and being crazy like Americans. That might make me forget. Just go out, see people. The most important thing is to go out and meet people. I don't know how, but I'll see. Maybe start to go out with co-workers. I don't really want to blame her (nodding her head towards her mother), but it's harder for me to change now. I am too old-fashioned.

CHAPTER 7

LOOK THA

Look Tha is a sixty-three-year-old man who displays great dignity and discipline. 'Look Tha' is a polite term for grandfather, and he is, in fact, a loving grandfather and a considerate husband.

Look Tha's narrative provides information about Cambodian social values and traditions, Buddhist philosophy, and an accurate description of the life of what Hou Youn (1982, 35) calls 'a middle peasant'. In pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodia, middle peasants owned small parcels of land usually scattered in the countryside, and adequate agricultural equipment. Though they frequently engaged in mutual aid, they provided for their existence principally by their own personal labor.

Early Years

I am a child of a farmer. I was born in Battambang Province, November 6, 1926. My parents had three boys and three girls. I lived with my parents and brothers and sisters in one house. When I was about four years old my grandfather died, and when I was about five or six my grandmother died. I have no cousins. My mother's brother

and my father's sister had no children. So we visited them a lot. When they were old, I would go and ask them if they wanted anything. When I became a monk, all of them died.

When I was four years old I had smallpox. About 15 days I slept on a banana leaf on the floor inside the house, because my body was full of boils and pus. If I slept on the sheets, they stuck to my body. I was very sick. Smallpox entered my eyes and I could not see very well. Hospitals were scarce, and we used all traditional medicine, made from coconuts, olives, and many other things from trees. All the things were crushed and squeezed to get water to drink. There was some other medicine to put on my body. I don't remember everything about the sickness, but my parents used to tell me. I remember a little.

In Cambodia, we had phum (village,) srok (city,) and the province. I lived in a phum. There were about 500 people in my phum, not a lot. My phum was small. In Cambodia we did not keep our doors shut like in America. We always left our door open so people would go to each other's home. So we knew many of the people in the phum. If someone new came, my friends would tell me his name. Most people in my phum had Honda motor cycles. I had a Honda also, so it was easy to go to another place. In the city we had paved roads, like here. But in my phum, we had

only gravel roads.

When I was small I wore shorts. When I was about 20 years old, I started to wear a sarong. But boys didn't usually wear shirts. They only wore the kramar (a large multipurpose scarf). Women wore sarongs and put on shirts. To bathe in Cambodia, I wore the kramar. When it dried I put it on the head if I was walking in the sun. I often put it over my shoulders. But until I was about eight, I did not wear a kramar or anything to bathe.

Cambodia is different from America. Over there, rich people and poor people were all farmers. Rich people had big gardens in one place and a lot of ox. Poor people had maybe two ox, and no land. My father was not rich and not poor. He was medium. He had only six ox, two bicycles, and one motor cycle, but he had a big house. We also had one cat and one dog. In Cambodia when people got a lot of money they bought furnishings to decorate the house, or land to give to their children. Many people in Cambodia didn't sell things to children. When children got married and separated to live on their own, the parents gave jewelry to their children. Girls got necklaces, earrings, and bracelets. Boys got rings and necklaces.

My father was a strong man and handsome. He was tall and big, like an American. But I am small. I like to be big, but my mother was very small. Before, when my father

was a child, his parents were not rich. But when he got married with my mother, they became gardeners and rice farmers and merchants. They tried to work hard. My father had about 70 ares (100 ares = 1 hectare) of rice fields and orange gardens. He filled the rice fields with water, and grew rice. When he harvested the rice, he grew beans, peanuts, potatoes, mustard, and white pepper. In the garden he grew cucumber, chili, and corn. In Cambodia, rice farmers and gardeners depended on rain for the water for their crops. It rained in January, February and March. In summer we had no rain. So my father, he would go to a country place to sell some clothes, and food, and medicines. He brought back to Battambang tobacco, and rice, and wire to make chairs. So he was a farmer and gardener and merchant. Every month, he sold his harvest. People came to the farm to buy. He also carried vegetables to the market by rickshaw. My mother and I sold them. My mother liked to work in the farm, and to buy and sell with father. Sometimes they hired people to help them, and about 30 ox carts would go to Battambang and go back to village. Sometimes my parents went away for about ten to eighteen days and my older sisters looked after the children. Later, when they married and lived with their husbands, I took care of the younger sister and brother. When I went with my parents somebody from the village took

care of family. My parents were good people. Every seela day (Buddhist holy days), both went to wat (Buddhist temple). My mother is still alive. She lives here. Now she is eighty-five years old. My father died in 1970.

When I grew big, about fourteen or fifteen years old, I helped my mother cook. She cooked inside the house on a wood fire. When I was a child, my mother cooked in clay pots, but the rice pot was copper. But later people did not use clay pots because clay pots, they broke easily. Instead, they used aluminum pots. My mother never had free time. When she finished working in the rice field she went to the countryside. In the rainy season she did not go anywhere, but she made many kinds of cakes to sell. When she came back, she prepared cakes for the next day. She made a small house near the river for selling cakes. It did not have walls, there was just a roof on four poles.

Sometimes I went to the river with my friends, and we brought food and ate together. I liked fruits: mango and small green coconuts because its water was better. We had many, many fruits in Cambodia; orange, grapefruit, papaya, pineapple, banana, sugar cane. The river water was very clear, and had a fast flow. The river had many fish, but I did not have much free time to go fishing because I took care of younger children.

When I was a child I went to the temple a lot. Many

people went to the temple. We went to the temple on New Year day, Khatan day, and Visak day (Buddhist holy days). The New Year day was always very happy. We played many traditional games like chung. A chung is a ball we make by tying a kramar around. To play chung, the girls and boys sing a song. Boys sing one part, and the girls sing the other part, and they exchange chung. When a boy throws the chung to the girls, he sings:

When I throw the chung,
The chung will break to four pieces.
Whichever girl gets the chung,
She can get me.

When the girl throws the chung back, she sings:

When I throw the chung,
It breaks into five.
Which boy has my Karma,
That boy can wait to wed with me.

Girls and boys who were about fifteen to twenty years old played chung. Sometimes there were about fifteen people in a group. We played in the temple at night, when the temple had many lights. The Cambodian New Year falls in hot weather, in April. So we played at night when it was not so hot. During daytime we played marbles. When I was a boy, I couldn't play in the sunshine because it was too hot. We played under big trees.

Buddhists say that when people die, they are born in different places. Cambodians believe that the spirits of the dead come to visit all the children. So every year in

November we decorated banana tree trunks with incense, about forty or fifty candles, many kinds of foods, cigarettes, and betel leaves and floated them in the river. Two or three people made one float together, and there were many floats. They were beautiful. Many people came to see them, and we felt very happy. We believed this ceremony will send the dead people back to their places.

When I reached five years my father taught me Cambodian. So in about six months, I was able to read and write some Cambodian. My father did not have a high education. In those days he never went to school. He only knew enough to teach me to read and write some. Most people in Cambodia taught their children until the children could read and write some. My sisters didn't learn to read and write. My father taught them, but later, he had no time. All day long, he was very busy. He had a lot of work to do. When I was seven years old my father took me to the temple. I took only my clothes, a blanket, and a pillow with me. In those days schools were scarce in Cambodia. We had only two government schools in Battambang. Boys learned Cambodian in the temple. There were about sixty or seventy boys in my temple. The temple was nearby, but across from the river. The first year I went back home about three, four times, because at that time I was very homesick. But later the monk did not allow

me to go.

When I lived in the temple I got up at 5:30 every morning. The big boys prepared food for monk. The small boys swept the dry leaves, and watered the plants. The monks went from house to house and collected rice, which was kept for lunch. We ate breakfast at about 7 o'clock. After breakfast, I learned Sanskrit, and about the story of the Buddha and other great people. But we did not have books like the ones used today. We used long leaf books. When it was time for lunch, we served the monks. Every day, many people brought food to the monks. The monks went to the people's houses if there was a celebration. After lunch, monks studied Dhamma and Pali. Old monks stayed in the temple, but because my temple was not a place for monks to learn Dhamma, the young monks went to another temple to study. After lunch, all the boys had free time. We went to the river to bathe, and the river was filled with children. We played till about 1:30, and then went back and studied Sanskrit again till 5 o'clock. At five, we had dinner. But only the boys ate dinner, not the monks. We did not cook anything for dinner because we left some food at lunch time to eat at night. There was always so much food. If there was not enough, we cooked. After dinner, we went again to the river to wash. Later on they constructed a water machine (spigot) in the temple so the

monks did not go to the river. But with the water machine we couldn't swim, so the boys went to the river. I had free time for about three hours, and then at night I studied the Dhamma. But at that time, we had no books to read. The monk taught and I memorized. At 10 o' clock we all went to sleep. Monks slept in the bedrooms and the boys slept outside in the verandah.

The boys who lived in the temple did not quarrel with each other. They were afraid of the monk. Sometimes when some boys did something wrong, the monks called them and taught them moral proverbs. But sometimes when boys did not listen and did wrong things many times, the monks hit them two, three times with the switch. But they hit only to scare the boys.

One time the monk beat me. When I went to bathe in the river, the Vietnamese were there catching fish. They kept the big fish to sell, but threw the small fish away. So I collected the small fish. But when I brought the fish to the temple the monk asked me "Why did you catch fish from the river?" I said, "No, I didn't catch them." But he did not believe me. He beat me and all the other boys who caught the fish because boys living in temple are not allowed to kill animals. In the temple there were many, many fruit trees; mango, mangosteen, coconut, bananas. But nobody stole fruits from the monk. Buddha says "Don't

steal." The big boys, when the fruit was ripe, gave them to the monks. There were about thirty, forty monks in my temple, but I liked Sankharaja the best. Sankharaja always called me to massage his legs. When he slept in the afternoon, I fanned him. He was 75 years old, tall and white. Oh, he was handsome! When he spoke to the pupils, he always smiled. He was a very good man.

When I was fourteen years old, I asked the monk to go back home. I left the temple because I went to government school. I liked government school because I understood everything better. I learned French and Cambodian. I did not have to pay school fees. All the books, I got from the government. When I finished one year, I gave the books back to the teacher. I went to school five days a week. We did not have school on Thursday and Sunday. There were about fifty students in my class. There was a long bench at one table for about five pupils. We wrote with pens, but you had to dip the pens in ink. Schools in Cambodia had holidays two times a year. From mid-June to mid-August we had a long holiday, and a short holiday in April.

There were many girl students in government school, about 20-40%. But I was not friendly with girls. At break time, girls played on one side of the school yard, and boys play on the other side. We did not join together. At that time boys and girls did not talk about love. We just

talked about simple things like explaining something if she knew that I didn't understand. But I studied only three years. When Thailand ruled Battambang, my father would not allow me to go to school because I was a big boy. I was about eighteen years old and I had to look after my younger sister and brother. They went to Thai school. So when I had free time, I tried hard to learn Thai language. I studied two days a week in the temple. The monk in the temple who knew the Thai language taught me. Sometimes the Thai teacher taught me. When I was about twenty I became a monk.

My parents wanted me to become a monk. It was the tradition for boys. At that time if someone did not become a monk, he was not considered a good person. People disliked them. But in the city, people in the government and merchants, they never became monks. They were too busy. But about 80% of the peasantry boys, they became monks at that time. My parents always told me "You must obey what we say." So what they told me to do, I did. I thought to myself, "I will train myself to be a good man when I become a monk." I thought people who did not know Dhamma, the Buddha language, were no good. People who have not become a monk always have wrong thoughts because they did not get an education. My grandfather and father were both monks. So, when I was 20 years old, I went to the

temple to become a monk. It was the same temple I went to when I was a young boy. Sankharaja, my teacher, was still alive.

When I became a monk there was a big ceremony. About a hundred people came to see. My parents came to see. Normal people (lay people) cut my hair. I wore a special sarong, but not the same kind as a monk. I wore a special white kramar. There was a procession with music and many people walking behind us. Five more boys became monks at the time I did. As a monk I learned Dhamma for about three years, but it was too short and I did not finish. If I had seven or eight years I could have learned a lot. After three years I went to Phnom Penh to teach Dhamma for one year. Then I came back to Battambang to teach for a year because my temple did not have a teacher.

The monks have many Seela (disciplinary precepts) to keep in mind. When I wanted to do something, I couldn't do what I liked. The monks say and do what the Buddha allowed to say and do. When I was a monk, I had to be careful of all my actions. At the people's houses, I could not laugh aloud, I could only smile. And not speak loud. When I walked I could not glance at other places. I could only look ahead. Otherwise one couldn't concentrate. Buddha said:

Sabba papassa akaranam
 Kusalassa Upasapada
 Scaitta pariyodapanam, etam
 Buddhana sasanam.

This means:

Avoid all evil
 do good
 Purify your heart

This is the teaching of the Buddha. This helps us to follow Buddha's teaching: Dana, Seela, Bhavana. When we receive Panchaseela from monk, all the Buddhist must keep the Panchaseela in mind: Not kill, not steal, not commit sexual misconduct, not lie, and not drink.

When we keep the Panchaseela in mind, we make Dana. Dana is made when we give food or anything to the monk or people or animal. We give Dana to the monk because the monk has no time to cook. He has time only to study and teach the Buddha language. So at the temple monks have no food. When people give food to the monk they enable the monk to live one more day and the people receive good result. In Buddha language good result is called, Punya (merit). But it is up to the people to give.

When we have Seela we bring happiness to people. After lunch, we will make Bhavana (meditation). If people have no Dana, Seela, Bhavana, those people are like animals. They do not know good or bad. They cannot purify their mind. The Buddha way is good for people in Cambodia.

I was very happy when I became a monk, because I

could become a good person. At that time I didn't want to leave the monkhood, but I thought, "I am still a strong man. I can work. When I am old and cannot work, I can become a monk again." So when I was twenty-six I left the monkhood. My father agreed. Before I left, Sankharaja taught me how to be with normal people. They gave me advice, and sprayed some water. I changed my clothes. I bid farewell to Sankharaja. Before I left him I worshipped him, and I was crying. When I came back home, I felt temple sick. I was filled with tears. But nobody saw me. When I came back, I obeyed my parents like when I was a little boy.

When I became a normal person I worked with business people. I controlled about 300 people cutting wood at the Thai-Cambodia border. I worked in the forest about six months. But you can't work in the forest during rainy season. So I worked in the train station, controlling coolies building lines.

Love and Marriage

When I was sixteen or seventeen I fell in love with a girl, but I could speak to her about love only secretly. Boys and girls spoke only about ordinary things. When I became a monk, I didn't talk about love. It was not a good thing to do, so I couldn't get married with her. That girl

got married with another man. But I was not sorry because I had wanted to become a monk since I was fifteen.

Those days boy allowed parents to choose the girl. When parents of the groom sought a bride for their son, they usually asked the neighbors "Is that girl good or bad?" If the neighbor told them "That girl is good," they came to the bride's house to ask her parents. If parents of groom came to ask about a girl, her parents also asked neighbors about the boy "Is that boy good or bad?" If the boy drank, played cards, or fought cocks, that boy was no good and a girl's parents did not agree to a marriage. But if they agreed, the boy's parents came to the girl's parents, and brought many things--banana, fruit, a whole head of pig, two hens, new clothes and many other things. The night before the wedding the bride and groom listen to monks give advice. The monks tell them not to say bad words to each other, and not do anything bad like adultery. The monks tell them to take care of each other.

I was 29 years old when I married. I never saw her, but anybody that knew her much, they told me she was a very good person. I just saw her on the wedding day. When I got married, I was not worried about whether the girl was beautiful, or whether her color was black or white. When I saw her I thought, "That girl is good for me to live with in the future." I trusted my parents. She never had a

boyfriend. If she had a boyfriend I would never have married her. It was the custom of Cambodia at that time not to marry girls who had boyfriends.

After marriage, I lived with my wife in her parents' house. I went to the countryside and became a farmer. It was my father-in-law's land. I planted mangoes, oranges, grapefruits, coconuts, many, many fruits. But that year, I couldn't harvest the crop because it took about six years for the trees to grow and bear fruit. So I planted vegetables: cucumber, corn, eggplant. I lived with my wife's parents about one year, until my father-in-law and mother-in-law could see I was able to do things for myself. Then I separated to live with my wife. My father-in-law gave me tools for my new farm, the land, about three ares. That was enough for me. I had no machines. I used the ox to plow, and I worked by hand, so I could not control a big farm. Later I sold the land my father-in-law gifted me, and bought more land. One place two hectare, one place five hectare, like that. I bought only as much land as I could control.

When I was a farmer I reached the garden at 6:30 in the morning. At 7:30 my wife brought breakfast for me. Sometimes I went home. I ate hot rice, just cooked, with dry fish. I worked till eleven, came home, bathed, ate. I slept till about two o'clock, and then went back to the

farm and worked till about five. I planted, I plowed, I dug, I cut, and sometimes I sprayed to kill insects. I took water to small plants. Orange garden, I watered by irrigation. But vegetables, I watered by hand. So I had to bring water from the well about 150 times. I had many plants to water and I carried water in two buckets tied to the end of a pole I carried on the shoulder. So if you are not strong man, you can't do it. Some people said I work hard, that they couldn't work like that. But I saw the result when I worked. When I went anywhere I had nice clothes to wear. Everyday I ate good food. My family had a good life. I had a good marriage. My parents worked hard before they got money. I thought, at this time I am very strong. So I must work hard. I did not have much free time, even on Saturday and Sunday. If someone invited me to their house, I went. But if I stopped working for one day, work piled up more and more, so I tried to work hard everyday. The more I worked, the more I sweated. I liked when it rained. Then I did not get tired. After about 7 years I became happy, because I had my harvests. I got about 6000 to 7000 riel (Cambodian currency) for my harvest. I kept all my money with my parents. Most people in Cambodia kept money in the house. Big people (rich people) only kept money in the bank. Sometimes my wife helped me in the farm. But I felt the woman is not strong

enough to work in the farm. She had to look after house and children. My wife was pregnant eleven times, but she had five miscarriages. One boy and one girl died after birth. One daughter died of disease when she was seven. So there were only three left. They are all here, in America.

Peasants in Cambodia were not like government people. Government people were born in Phnom Penh. They went to school, they had a good education. They were high class. All of them were rich. But I was a child of a farmer. I studied and got some knowledge. I came from monkhood to the village, to do plantation work. But I was not angry that I was poor, because I knew what I could do for myself. I could plant, sell, and do good things in my home for my family, and do good to other persons in the village. I never fought with the people in my village. I said gentle words, so all the people in my village, they liked me.

Before I married I stayed in the city. After I married I went to the farm. I constructed a house and a barn, and went to farm. But I had numbness in 1970. In 1970, I could not walk. I had to crawl on the floor for about four months. When I wanted to pass stools I used a spit pan. My wife helped me. When I wanted to urinate, I had to use a bottle. My brother-in-law brought medicine and injection. But the doctor helped me with tree roots.

After nearly five months, I was able to hold on to something and stand. Then I could walk using a cane. I had already planted in my garden, and when it was harvest time I hired many people. My wife worked in the farm. Still, I felt happy because I could see the things in my garden. But then Lon Nol soldiers attacked the Khmer Rouge. Some days I couldn't sleep, the artillery was so loud. Even the roof shook. One time, Khmer Rouge bombed near my house, but my house was not damaged. When Lon Nol and Pol Pot soldiers fought I escaped from the farm to the city.

The Khmer Rouge Experience

On April 17, 1975, Khmer Rouge came to Battambang. I didn't know about their rule. I thought they had good rule called Khmer Revolution. But when they controlled Battambang they arrested many people they thought they had to investigate. Many of my relatives were killed because they worked in the government and the Khmer Rouge despised Lon Nol government.

When Pol Pot soldiers came to control Battambang they came and asked my brother-in-law to come to the store to get something to eat. And then in front of the store, on the sidewalk, they killed him. I did not see him killed because at that time I could not walk. I crawled on the ground. But my wife saw him. He got killed at about nine

o' clock in the night. Tomorrow at 10 o' clock, Pol Pot soldiers ordered him to be brought to the temple. So my wife and his wife brought him to the temple for funeral. I don't know why he was killed. Soldier did not say. They also killed my father-in-law, brother, another brother-in-law, and uncle-in-law. Pol Pot had been there only about three to five days. People in Battambang were still not evacuated. About one week later Pol Pot chased the people to the country. They talked by the gun. OUT, OUT, OUT. SHOOT.

When we were evacuated many people walked along with pigs, cattle, chicken, and children. Some carried children on the hip or on the back. Some who couldn't walk because they carried too much, they walked behind. So the soldiers would shoot from behind. All the people in Cambodia kept food in the house. When Pol Pot evacuated everybody could take only a little rice and fish. Everything had to be left in the house. Pol Pot said we are going only for three days. But I thought Pol Pot lied. I knew I could not come back to my house after three days. So I took money and gold. I returned to my farm but there were other people living in my farm. So I lived in another little house. Usually, houses in Cambodia had a step made from bamboo. I hid the gold inside the bamboo, or buried it in the ground.

Before the Pol Pot time I had never been separated from my children. If I went somewhere I stayed only for one night. We all lived together then. After evacuation I lived with my wife, two daughters and son. But later they sent away my big daughter and son. My younger daughter looked after all the babies because their parents went to work. She was always careful about the Pol Pot regulations. I felt so sick about my children. They felt so sick about me. My wife was sick and upset. My older daughter came back after being away for six or eight months. But she came home only for two days. Then she had to go away. My son come back after one year. I was an old man. I had numbness still, so I couldn't walk. So the soldiers told me to cut grass. So I sat on the floor, cut grass or made baskets.

Pol Pot taught his soldiers to despise all the people in the city, and everything about religion. The head monk of Battambang, very good, very intelligent man, got killed when Pol Pot came. He was my relative. He spoke quietly, never noisily. All the people in Battambang Province liked him. He spoke French, Pali, Sanskrit, Cambodian, Thai and Vietnamese. Pol Pot told him to dig a hole. Then they hit him with a hoe, and buried him. But he was not buried properly. His legs were outside the hole still. During Pol Pot time, one day I saw a boy having an ax. The Pol

Pot soldier borrowed the ax. Later he brought it back with blood. The boy was looking at the ax, so the soldier washed the ax in the river. I saw it, but I don't know who they killed. I saw a man tied up and being hit with long poles. There was a big noise when they hit, and lot of blood came. One man in my village was a handicap. He had no fingers, no toes. He had a disease, but he walked. One day he ate the stem of cassava after the cassava was dug because he was starving. Pol Pot soldier saw and they killed him. They said he stole the cassava. Many people were hit and killed in my village. I didn't know when they would bring me to kill. I was always very upset. It was terrible.

We worked hard. Worked under the heat of the sun with no shelter. When we ate the rain would fall and mix with rice gruel. In Pol Pot time we had no medicine and no food. People starved. Before, when I was young, I killed fish. But after I was about 42 years old I never killed. But during Pol Pot time I killed snails and fish because I was starved. Some people caught crab, but I could not catch crab because I could not walk. In Pol Pot time, someone who never killed animals before, killed, because they starved.

Pol Pot was very bad. I felt angry, but I never said anything to get revenge. I kept quiet. If I got revenge

from Pol Pot soldiers, I would be like them. Not a good man. I thought about Buddha's words: if someone did wrong to another person and that person took revenge, the result will never end. So I dislike taking revenge. I thought, if I did anything bad in a previous life, something bad will happen to me. But if in a previous life I didn't do bad, if I never killed, stole, or did bad things to any people, I thought I can escape the killing from Pol Pot. In Pol Pot time we could not give Dana. I had little, so I could not give to any people. No Seela, I killed. But Bhavana, yes, I meditated. I recited Dhamma in my mind every night. Nobody else could hear. I prayed to the Ratana Thrai (The Three Jewels).

Khadesa, Khadesa
Kang Karana Khadesa
Ahang Petthang Cha Na Mi

It means, if anybody has done me any wrong, I never took revenge. I believe my meditation helped my son. My son, when he lived in another place, sometimes he would come to my house in the night. But one night Pol Pot soldiers saw my son. They arrested my son and took him to kill. So I meditated to Buddha, Dhamma. My hands were working, but my mind was meditating. My son came back. They did not kill him. Someone told the controller in that village he know my son. They said he was a good worker in another place, and he was not killed.

I think when people die, they are born again. But some people who led a good life, observed Panchaseela or anything good, will be born again in the heaven or in Universe. People who did bad things, they will be born in hell, or become animals. In the future, result of Karma will not bring Pol Pot soldiers to a good place. Or someday, they will get killed also. If they do not get killed in this life, when they die, they will be born in bad places, or as animals. Already in this life they have to live like animals. I saw them in the jungle after the Vietnamese came.

Escape to Thailand

When the Vietnamese came I went back to my house. I controlled my property. I grew sweet potatoes, corn, chili. Then the Vietnamese called for my son to join the army. It was the Cambodian army, but controlled by Vietnamese. Those days my son was single. He was about 18 years old. They also called my son-in-law. So we thought we will escape, but we kept it secret. Later on many Cambodian men joined the army because they were forced. I thought communists are all the same. I dislike Communists because I have no freedom to do anything or to say anything. So I left home on November 20, 1979.

When I fled from Cambodia, sometimes my son or son-

in-law carried me on their backs. Sometimes I walked slowly. My daughter, son, and son-in-law were strong. So they walked fast, but then waited for me. My wife came with me from Cambodia. But her legs were too bloody because she walked far. (Look Tha indicated her soles were cracked). So she walked more slowly than me. I walked five days and four nights. But I hired a motor trailer for about 70 kilometers. A motor trailer is a motor cycle with a trailer behind. It can take about nine people. I had enough gold to hire one. Our family had ten people altogether. But there were many, many people on the road. People who could not hire motor trailers walked all the way to camp. Some people walked for fifteen days. If I had not taken the motor trailer we would have walked about seven to eight days because everybody was not strong enough. We had only a little food, so we walked slowly. We came to Cambodian-Thai border on November 24, 1979. I thought if I lived in the border, that place had a lot of fighting. So I went to Thai camp. The big bus took me to Thailand. I did not have to pay.

Life in Refugee Camps

I came to Khao-I-Dang camp on December 8, 1979. When I first came to the camp I had a blanket, some clothes, a little food, and a bucket to carry water. The UN told all the people of my family will stay together in a shelter.

The shelter was long. There was a wall for each family. We came to one place to get food. We got bean sauce, fish sauce, salt, and rice. We all shared the food. If we did not get enough food, I bought some. I had some gold left from Cambodia. I sold the gold and got some bhat (Thai currency) and spent for food. I met some people from my village in the camp. I felt happy because things were very different from Pol Pot time.

When I came to the camp, everyday I studied English with a Thai-English dictionary. I knew not much Thai, but I could speak and understand some. My son-in-law didn't know the Thai language, but he knew a little English. He knew much French, so he understood English before I did. He asked me about the Thai language, and we explained to each other. I studied English For Today, Book III. Any English words I didn't understand, I wrote down. Then I went to the library, and looked them up in the English-Thai dictionary. I wrote the words in Thai and I memorized them. I never thought about coming to America. I only thought about moving far away from the fighting. Then I thought, "Many Cambodians are coming to America, so I will also come." But I was sent with my wife to another camp in 1980. I lived there for about 20 months. Then I came back to Khao-I-Dang camp again. I didn't want to move from my children, but I got orders from the UN or Thai people to

move. So my daughter and son-in-law came to US before me. In 1981 I came to interview in Khao-I-Dang Camp. I came out of Khao-I-Dang to Transit after about about two and a half years. They examined my chest, and I was not well. So they kept me and treated me. After about seven months I went to Philippines, and then I came to America on March 26, 1984.

Arrival in America

My brother came to America before Pol Pot. He helped me by asking the government of USA to let me come to USA. My daughter, son-in-law, brother, niece, and especially my mother, they all live here. When I came I lived with my daughter and son-in-law in their old house. My son-in-law helped me with everything like going to IRC (International Rescue Committee), and hospital. He and my daughter got welfare. When they finished technical study, they got jobs. I knew nothing about America before I came here. At first, I always went to the doctor, sometimes six times a month because I had numbness and trouble with urinating. In 1985, I had an operation.

I feel upset in America because I want to know English. I never learned English in the camp. I never studied English in Battambang. The camp had an English teacher, but I had no money to pay. I would like to buy an

old car and go to school. I want to learn English. Some people say "You are an old man. Why do you want to learn English?" But I want to learn to speak, to improve my mind. I can read the English newspaper. I understand about 50% of the words. But I cannot speak. Sometimes I watch television, but the man speaks too fast.

I miss my homeland. I like it in my phum. More freedom to go anywhere I like. I think about my plants in the big garden. I have relatives and close friends I miss. I write to them to tell them I live in the USA, and ask them what they do. Here, I don't know neighbors. But in Cambodia many people were gardeners or farmers. People did not wait for Saturday and Sunday to talk. Wherever they wanted to go, they went on any day.

Here food is different. In Cambodia people did not eat much meat. They ate much fish. In Cambodia when I went to work, I would feel hot. I would take a bath, and eat many, many food, but I did not get fat. In Cambodia people do not have diets. In America I don't do any work. So I eat very little, not to starve. If I eat a lot, I get fat. My daughter was thin in Cambodia, but now she is fat. When you get very fat you look bad. I like thin woman and man.

Sometimes I think Americans don't like refugees. One time, the young American, he climbed into the bus before

me. But he stood still. He didn't move forward. So I waited for a long time. I climbed up and came behind him, and he hit me (shoved with the elbow). And I had to hold the pole not to fall. I wondered, why did the young American do like that? America is capitalist, not communist. Why do people do like this? But I couldn't do anything, I kept quiet. I am an old man. I am not American. The driver and many people in the bus saw what happened, but they didn't say anything.

Reflections, Perceptions, Adjustments

I think Cambodia fell because people in the countryside did not have much education. They went to temple and became monks. But when they became monks they couldn't go to another temple to study. Therefore, they did not learn Dhamma. They did not know what was good and what was bad. A person with a good mind, he went to the city. But some people from the city went to the countryside to lead stupid people in the forest. Rebels do not happen in the city. Always happen in the countryside. When someone can talk political, the man in the countryside believes. But someone who was intelligent and lived in the countryside, he did not believe Khmer Rouge. He went to live in the city.

I think Cambodia fell also because of wrong politics. All the times Sihanouk came to Battambang, I saw him. I

listened to him speak for a long time, sometimes three hours. When he spoke soldiers guarded all around, and made people listen. He talked about politics and about other countries. In 1953 Sihanouk fought for independence and Cambodia got independence in 1954. That time many people liked Sihanouk. Sihanouk was glorious in Cambodia. He kept Cambodia in the middle (politically neutral). About 1964-66, I am not sure, Sihanouk visited China and his politics changed because at that time he thought that communist will triumph over the capitalist. All people despised Ho Chi Minh. But Sihanouk had communism with Ho Chi Minh. When Ho Chi Minh died no country respected Ho Chi Minh's corpse. Only foreign ministers went. But from Cambodia, the President, Sihanouk went. So I think those days Sihanouk leaned towards China. In 1966 Sihanouk left the UN. He leaned towards socialism. So I dislike Sihanouk. Only stupid people in the countryside like Sihanouk. The government of Thailand, they can progress their country to peace. But the leader of Cambodia governed the wrong way. And he got result like Pol Pot.

I left Cambodia thinking I will go back later. I have many property there. My son, daughter, and son-in-law, all of them went to school and know everything. In Cambodia, people intelligent, they can do anything in business, government, plantation. My children, all of them

can get good jobs. Before, I thought if Cambodia gets a good government, I will go back to live. Now I think if I have money, I will go back to see Cambodia. Cambodia is not peaceful because Pol Pot wants to control. They have many, many weapons that China gave them. Now everyday I think communism is not good. I distrust communists. I feel sad and homesick. But I never think about going back. I live in America. But I never dream about America. I dream about Cambodia. Sometime I dream I am fishing in Cambodia. But sometimes I dream I work for Pol Pot. I get very upset thinking "Why I went back to Cambodia?" When I wake up I am happy. I live in America.

My sister, nieces, and nephews live in Cambodia. My niece has many children. Her husband died about 1982. My sister is very old. She is not strong enough to work. So she has not enough to eat. My sister has one son, and he did not want to escape from Cambodia. My family had many property and they collected all the property. But my nephew, nowadays he is a Cambodian soldier. He drives a truck to import and export something to the border. His wife works in the bank but she gets salary only 3 riel a month. It's not enough. Sometimes if I have money, I send money to them. When I send money to Cambodia, I pay 30% in commission to the person who takes the money to my sister.

When my relatives write letters from Cambodia they

cannot say anything. If we write from USA, we cannot say anything. We only write about wife. Because when letters go from USA, if someone has written opposing the Vietnamese government, they punish the person who got the letter. If they write letters from Cambodia to me with ideas opposing the government they have to pay a penalty. So they can't say anything. But however the Vietnamese are better than Pol Pot.

When I stayed in Cambodia after the Vietnamese regime came, there were never any robberies. But when I stayed in the camp somebody wrote that there are many many robberies by Vietnamese soldiers. When I came to Khao-I-Dang camp my best friend from village came to border to buy things and go back to village. He told me the Vietnamese checked the bag he carried on his shoulder. If they saw something they didn't like, they kicked my friend. A person who later came to camp told me they kicked my friend, and broke three ribs. He died. His name was Prov. He was about 36 years. He had six children.

I dislike the Vietnamese. I have read chronicles of Cambodia and Vietnam. Cambodians and Vietnamese are enemies. But I never did anything bad to Vietnamese. In my village there were about 20 Vietnamese families. They spoke to each other in Vietnamese, but they spoke to Cambodians in Cambodian. They didn't do anything bad to

Cambodians. But we were not close friends. We only just talked. Vietnamese were usually fishermen. They lived in the bank of the river. There were only a few Cambodian fishermen. Cambodians have many work; carpenter, gardener, farmer. We dislike to fish, to kill. Only at night time when we got together to talk, sometimes we caught fish. The rice fields were far away from the market, so some people, they caught fish. But only for food, not for pleasure or to sell, and not everyday.

Now in America I have Vietnamese neighbors. I only say 'Hi' to them, and they say 'Hi' to me. I cannot become close friends. Many Vietnamese are Buddhist, but I dislike them. Buddha said to treat all people equally, but I think Vietnamese were my enemy before. They have not done anything wrong to me, but in chronicle they have the history. Here, some Cambodian women marry Vietnamese men. I get very angry. But I like Chinese people. If my grandchildren marry with Chinese, I like. Chinese are the same as Cambodians. I don't know what I would do if my grandchildren marry with Vietnamese. I don't want to think about it. I don't like my children or grandchildren marrying with Americans or Spanish people. We have different customs.

When I was in the Philippine camp, I went to school. My teacher was a Mormon Christian. She told me "When you

come to America you must not forget the culture from Cambodia. Teach your culture to all your children and grandchildren." Those days I thought, "Why does she say like that?" I thought in America they let people keep their natural cultures, because in this country there is freedom. The Government will allow people to keep their cultures. Before America never had Buddhism. But right now Buddhism is scattered in all the states. So I thought the government of America will not prohibit other cultures. I never thought about the culture of America because people born and living in their own country, they will like their own culture. I never dislike the American culture. But sometimes I dislike people kissing on the road, or on the sidewalk. In Cambodian culture, it is shameful to kiss so all the people can see. I never saw people kissing in Thailand, or in the Indian video tape; they never kiss on the road. Sometimes I take the bus. When I wait for the bus, young man, young woman, they kiss. But I never look at them. I am an old man, and I am ashamed of them. If my granddaughters kiss, I will prohibit if I saw. But I am not sure if they will listen to me. It is up to them. In this country I like the hospital best. All of the receptionist, the nurse, the doctor, all of them always say the good words. So I feel very happy.

Young Cambodian people about 18 to 25 years never

knew about culture and custom of Cambodia. They grew up in Pol Pot time, and came to America. So they follow American custom. Young man, woman, eighteen, twenty years, they shout, they jump when they talk to each other. Old man and woman tell them not to do it but they don't listen. Young people who went to school here only know culture of America. I think they dislike the culture of Cambodia. But still, there are people here who tell their children about the culture and custom of Cambodia.

This country is different from Cambodia. In Cambodia all children obey their parents. But in this country, the children go to school, and their teacher teach them about freedom. In Cambodia my teacher told me "When you go back home, whatever parents say, obey them. Never do anything that your parents will dislike." So children usually did anything their parents told them to do. But all children, when parents prohibited them to do anything, they did it secretly. Sometimes I did too. My mother used to say "When the river swells up, you must never swim, or you will drown." So when she left to go somewhere, I went swimming. If she found out she switched me.

I want my grandchildren to study Cambodian chronicle and Cambodian letters. But at this time, they are little. Also, it is up to their parents. If their parents want them to know Cambodian culture, Cambodian tradition,

Cambodian chronicle, I want them to know. Before I teach my grandchildren about Cambodian culture, I will ask my daughter and son-in-law if they will allow me to teach. I am their grandfather and I take care of them, but if anybody dislikes something, I will not do it. They must have freedom to say if they dislike. Example: if I dislike going to church, nobody should force me to go to church.

The Cambodian language has many high words. So my grandchildren cannot understand. But when people come to our house, they must show respect. They must greet the people with palms together. When the people leave, they must again show respect. When we go to another house, we will respect the owner of that house. My daughter and son-in-law tell the children to greet. It is the custom of Cambodia. When I meet an old man or old woman I greet, even if I don't know them. In Cambodia you greet the people you like best. If you don't like someone, you just say 'Soosaday' (Hi). You don't greet with palms together.

In my country, only government people shake hands. Here, if I meet a young man I give my hand. In Cambodia the younger person will greet first in Cambodia, and the older person will greet back. But many young men who came to America, they were not big enough to know customs of Cambodia. So I greet first. But at the temple, or in the house, when we make Punryakarma (alms giving ceremonies),

they all greet me, the old man. But if someone is an important person, even if he was younger, I greet first.

The Cambodians in America live with other Cambodians because people who came first can help others to go to hospital, to the store. Some people have no jobs and many children. They are not happy. But many people who came to America in 1979 had a lot of education. So they have got good jobs. Those families are happy. On Saturday, Sunday, they can go to Lake Tahoe, Las Vegas, Monterey, Santa Cruz, Disneyland. But poor people are not happy. I am in the middle. Not very happy, not very unhappy. I am an old man. I never want to go to the cinema or to the concert. I have seen all that in Cambodia. I am different from old men in America. They go to places to find ways to be happy. I am not like that. I am happy staying at home, watching TV, reading books. But when I watch TV, some stories are not good. People are naked and have sex. Then I put off the TV. I feel shy because that story is for young people. I think wherever I live, if nobody forces me to do anything, I don't worry about the place I am in. If I have freedom to purify my mind, meditate, to talk about Dhamma, to read, go to the wat, I am happy.

Before, I had many relatives, friends, property, and I liked them. Many of my relatives and many Cambodians died. I do not think only of my relatives. I think of all

the people that got killed in Cambodia. All people in Cambodia had the same religion, the same nationality, the same dress. When I am lonesome and I think of Cambodia and Pol Pot, I get so upset. I do not cry, but my head is very tight, and my chest is sick. I can't do anything, so I meditate. I go to the room, shut the door. I don't allow my grandchildren to come. I just concentrate on breathing: the air is cool when I breathe in and it touches the nostril. When I breathe out, the air is hot when it touches the nostril. I do not think about anything else. Only about air touching the nostril. I meditate, read newspaper, history, Buddha stories, to forget about Cambodia and troubles.

I am not afraid to die. But when I get sick, I take medicine. I think when dying time comes, I don't care. Men and women all grow old. I think whatever time I have to die, I will die. I am not worried because I didn't do anything that other people dislike. But in Pol Pot time, I didn't want to die, because my mind was not good. I was angry with Pol Pot. In Pol Pot time, I had no clothes, no food, they forced me to work, so I could not purify my mind. I didn't want to die. It is important to purify my mind when dying time comes because if my mind does not have good thoughts, I don't know where I will be reborn. Humans who did not purify their minds can be born in any bad

place, Buddha said. But after I came to America, I don't mind dying. I am an old man. I am not strong enough to work. Government gives me enough money to live from month to month, and I have a place to live.

I wish wherever I am reborn, I will know Buddhism. Because Buddha word is true. I say that, because Christian religion say if I lie, kill, do sin, I can wash away the sin. But I don't believe that. If people do anything wrong, they receive bad result. If anybody does good, they receive good result. For example, I say bad word to you, you will get angry with me. But if I say good word to you, you will be happy. If somebody touches the fire, they will be burnt. But if they do not touch the fire, they will not burn. Some religions like Cham Khmer (Muslim), they kill animal. It is a big sin. All animals like life, same as people. But some people say because we eat meat, fish, the butcher kills. But I think I if I don't eat, they still kill. They don't kill for me. I never order them to kill animal for me. When I want to eat meat, I buy it. But sometimes I don't want to eat meat, so I don't buy it.

I don't know where I will be reborn. But I will do good in this life because when people are jealous, greedy, steal, lie, or take intoxicants, results of karma will not be very good in another life. I wish to be reborn anywhere that has Buddhism, so I can listen to Dhamma, study Dhamma,

and purify my mind.

CHAPTER 8

PU MA

I met Pu Ma, which means 'friend', almost at the beginning of my fieldwork. Pu Ma is a vivacious, thirty-nine-year-old woman who outwardly appears to be happily adjusted to America. Her narrative, however, reveals that she strongly desires to return to Cambodia. Pu Ma treated me with kindness and hospitality from the beginning, and was greatly responsible for my quick and easy acquaintance with the Khmer community. She is a true friend not only to me, but to many others in her community. Her daughter's story appears in Chapter 9.

Early Years

I remember when I was very young and I lived in my country my mother was very, very poor. My mother told me that first she got married with my sister's father, but he died. Then my mother went with the children to live with my grandmother and grandfather. My father, who was a soldier, came to my grandmother's home. He said with my grandmother "I love your daughter." But my grandmother said, "No," because my mother had small children. My mother had my brother, sister, I, and one child in the

stomach. When the baby was born my father came again. My mother said, "No." My mother saw her first husband in a dream. He told her "If you get married with another man I will take one child." My mother told my grandmother that she was scared. But my grandmother and grandfather got frightened because my father, the bad soldier, he said he will kill all of them. So my mother had to marry with my father. After the wedding one child was dead. The child was not sick. But you know ghosts? All the people in my country believe in ghosts. All the people in my country are very, very scared of ghosts. In my country every year in November, ghosts come back. In November, my mother drew a face on a sauce pan and put it in front of the house. Then ghosts don't come in the house. It's the same as people in this country believing in Halloween.

I liked my mother. She was a good person. But I didn't like my father. He fought with my mother every day. My father didn't give my mother any money, so my mother made cakes to sell and I sold them. A friend who lived nearby used to give food to my mother. I remember my mother wanted to go to visit my grandmother. But my grandmother lived across the river. My mother had no money for the boat. I remember my mother saying she had two cans of rice to pay the boatman. When the boat was in the middle of the river my mother saw a fish. The fish was

dead. My mother dove into the water and got the fish. She brought it home to cook for the children. My mother didn't have luck (merit). My mother had a very, very poor life. She wanted to go to the temple every day. She made food to take to the temple. Sometimes she went to clean the temple. I helped her. I heard my mother say that when she was born again, she didn't want to marry with my father.

My mother was very poor. But she said to my older sister, me, and my younger sister "Go to school." But I liked my mother. I said, "Mother, you are very poor. You don't have money. I don't want to go to school." But my teacher said my big sister doesn't study, and my younger sister doesn't come to school, but that she will help me because I was smart. So I went to school.

When I was about nine years old, my king, Norodom Sihanouk, he wanted to visit my school. My teacher said I had to learn Cambodian dancing to show my king. I learned dancing with my teacher. My teacher asked, "Can you buy the clothes (costume) for a white butterfly?" But I had no money. I didn't like my mother owing money to other people. So I didn't go to school any more.

When Norodom Sihanouk came soldiers had to guard him. But my father didn't stay at his post. He walked around drinking wine. So my father's boss put my father in jail. My father got mad. Next day at 3:30 my father went back

home. He called my mother. He said, "I have come to say goodbye." My mother didn't understand. She said, "Where are you going?" My father said, "I don't know." He put on new pants and a shirt with long sleeves. He took his kramar and left. At 4:30 a soldier came running and said to my mother "Your husband is dead." My mother said, "No, he just came and left again." But she ran to see. My father was dead. I saw him. He had put a rope round his neck.

After my father died my mother lived with my uncle. She made cakes to sell. My uncle said to her "You keep the money." After my father died I didn't go back to school. I helped my mother make a lot of cakes and my mother became rich. She built a big house. She got married again, maybe when I was about twelve years old. When I was fourteen years old I went to work in the factory. I made sacks and mattresses. I worked for one year and half, and I got married.

Love And Marriage

I met my husband in the factory. He was a mechanic. My husband lived in Battambang like me, but he lived in the country. I lived in the town. He told me "Pu Ma, my father doesn't have money. But I want to get married with you." He told my parent he wanted to marry me. But all my family didn't like my husband because my husband was very,

very poor. My mother, she told me "You can get married with a soldier." But I said, "No, I have a boyfriend, and I don't want to get married with another man." When I lived with my mother she bought me a necklace, a watch, and a bracelet. When I got married I gave them back to my mother. I didn't want to keep them because my mother had bought them for me and I thought my mother was mad at me. But I loved my mother. I said to my mother "Mother, in future, when I am very happy with my husband I will come back to see you. But if I have problems with my husband, I will not come to you, because I made a mistake." I went with my husband to his house because all my family didn't like him because he was poor.

All the people in my husband's family were very good. I loved my father-in-law. He was very poor, but he was very polite to me. He loved me very much. My father-in-law was very poor because he could not work. He broke his leg when he was traveling on a motorcycle and his leg got caught in the wheel. He had to use crutches to walk. After he broke his leg and could not work, his wife left. So he had to go to his sister's house to eat. And because there was no woman in the house, they didn't have much furniture. So I bought furniture with the money people gave when we got married.

My stepfather, first he was a farmer. Then he helped

my mother to make cakes. After I got married my mother became pregnant. Then my stepfather, he went to Phnom Penh because he wanted to work as a soldier. So when my mother had my brother, I took my mother to live with me. My husband, my mother, my brother, and I lived in a house near the factory. My aunt had a house next to my mother's house and she took care of my mother's house.

My husband and I went to work and we got money. My husband kept the one thousand riel I got every month under the bed. He went to work even on Saturday and Sunday. He rode a motor cycle and took passengers on the back seat. At night he put a bait in the river to catch fish, and in the morning, he took the fish to sell. When we had earned a lot of money we bought a motor cycle, gold, and furniture. We had money to buy land to build a house. My mother also helped me. She gave me money. I bought the land. At this time my mother went back to her house.

The Khmer Rouge Experience

My son, he was born in 1971. My daughter, she was born in 1973. When she was two years old I became pregnant again. When I was pregnant one month and half, the Pol Pot came into the town. They said, "Good people can work in the factory." Some people had to go to the farm. But my husband and I worked in the factory.

When Pol Pot came to the town, my husband went back to my home town to see my mother. When he came back he said, "Pu Ma, I didn't see your mother, and I didn't see the people who lived in the town. I saw only Pol Pot." I didn't know where my mother, all my family, and all my friends went because I lived in the factory. I said to my new boss, the Pol Pot soldier, that I wanted to find my mother and my family. He said OK. I took rice and fish because I had lot of food in the factory. I saw my mother living in the farm of her first husband. She did not have food. She was eating the husk of the rice and she was very thin. So I brought her to live in the factory with me.

The Pol Pot came in 1975. In 1977 the soldiers moved the people in the factory to the farm. My family and all my friends, we went in a truck to live in a mountain. When we went to the mountain, for the first time I saw people who were very, very thin, dying. My family had a very difficult time. The soldier Pol Pot separated me and my husband and he had to go to another farm. And my stepfather was separated from my mother. My son and my brother, the Communist Pol Pot took, and put in the school. They couldn't sleep in my home. My daughter and my young son were too small, so they lived with me and my mother. I had to work in the farm. My mother was fifty years old, so she took care of the new baby.

After one year my husband got sick. He wanted to live with me. But the soldier said, "No." I told my boss I wanted to see my husband. He said I can go to see my husband for half a day. My husband was very, very thin. I said to my boss I wanted to bring my husband to live with me because my husband was too sick. He said OK. When my husband was better he carried vegetables from the farm to the home where people lived. And my husband also found food for all my family.

After my husband lived with me for maybe three month, I heard that my sister who lived in another farm was having problems. My sister had a new baby, and she didn't have food. When my mother heard of my sister's problem, she was sad. She said, "Pu Ma, you can help your sister. You can take food for your sister." I said, "Mother, I can't go because sister lives far away. I am scared of the Communist Pol Pot." But my mother said, "If you don't go, I will go." I thought my mother was too old to go. So I said, "OK, you take care of my children. I will go." My husband, he was sick. He was having problems with his knee. He couldn't walk well. But when he heard me he wanted to go with me. I said, "No, you can't walk." But my husband said, "You don't go alone. I go with you." I said to my boss "I want to go to see my sister." My boss said OK, but he didn't help me after that. We walked far

away. I turned around to look at the farm where my mother lived, and I saw the mountain. I missed my children. I said to my husband "I don't want to go, I want to go back to see my children." My husband said, "No." We left at ten o'clock in the morning. At nine o'clock at night, we saw my sister. I was very tired. I gave the food to my sister, and I slept with my husband. Next morning we started to walk to our village. But soldier Pol Pot came and tied up my husband and I because they thought we were running away to live with the Vietnamese. They took my husband and I to a jail in the temple.

The soldier tied my arms and pushed me on the bed. He fought with me using the gun. (Using a pencil, Pu Ma demonstrated how the soldier poked the barrel of the gun hard on her chest). He wanted to know why I wanted to run away to join the Vietnamese. I said, "My husband and I are not running away to live with the Vietnamese. I came to find my sister. I have a baby living in the mountain." I showed him the milk in my breasts. My son had not drunk milk for two days. The soldier believed me. They did not fight with me again.

My husband lived in a big room in the temple. I lived in the same temple, but in a small room. The women lived with the women and men lived with the men. There were many, many men, maybe about seven hundred. They

didn't have water to drink, didn't have rice to eat. I saw the people, they were very, very thin, and small. They asked me "You help me lady? I want water to drink." But I said, "No, I can't help you because I am scared of the Pol Pot soldier." I didn't want to see them, and I didn't want to hear them. It was very, very difficult. My husband, the soldier put his legs and hand in chains every day. When he wanted to urinate he could not go to the bathroom because he couldn't walk. At night mosquitoes bit the people. It was very, very dirty and smelled bad.

I had to go to work everyday. I worked behind the temple, planting rice. When I went to work I got a small bowl of rice. But when I was sick and I couldn't go I didn't get rice. So everyday I went to work because I wanted to get food for my husband. The first time I went to see my husband, he said, "Pu Ma, you must not live here. You run away to see the children and your mother." I was sad everyday because I missed my children and my mother. So I ran away. But after I ran maybe four blocks I went back to the temple. Because if I ran away they would kill my husband.

The Pol Pot soldiers, some were bad soldiers and some were good. I knew a good soldier because I fixed a torn sweater for him. Sometime when he had rice he gave me some. When I wanted to see my husband I told the good

soldier I wanted to see my husband. He let me see my husband for fifteen minutes or ten minutes. The first time I took the rice to my husband he said, "Pu Ma, I want to see my children." I said, "OK, but first you eat." My husband smiled. He said, "Maybe I will not die. Maybe in the future I will see my children." He was happy. The next day I took him some rice again. But my husband said, "No, I don't need to eat Pu Ma, you eat alone. Because you are a lady you may go back to your children. Don't worry about me." He thought he will die. When my husband said that I cried. And my husband cried too. He loved the children. My husband was very, very thin and small. He didn't have blood, I saw his skin was white. One month and five days after we were taken to jail, the communist Pol Pot put all the men in a truck. I asked, "Where are you taking my husband?" They said, "We are taking your husband to go to work in another place." But another Pol Pot, a good one, he told me "Pu Ma, the communist Pol Pot took your husband to kill him. They took him to a big hole in the mountain and killed him with an ax. All the men died, all together." The good soldier told me. So I know my husband is dead.

They took the men to kill after one month five days, and after one month and seven days, they took all the old ladies, the children, and I to kill. But they didn't take

us in a truck. They walked us to the farm behind the mountain. When I was walking, the good soldier said to me "Pu Ma, the Pol Pot is going to kill you. You must run. When you run, sometimes you might be killed, but sometime you might not be killed." When the communist Pol Pot started to kill another lady, I ran with three other people. I ran okay. But after I got away, I couldn't walk at daytime. I could walk only at night. I walked for one week. Everyday I thought, "Maybe tonight I will see my children and mother." When I got to the mountain, my mother's boss saw me. He said, "You want to die? Why did you run?" I said, "Before I die, I want to see my mother and my children." He took me to live with my mother and my son. I slept with my mother for three days.

After three days my stepfather, he lost a cow he looked after. So he walked far away to find the cow and didn't come back. My mother's boss, he asked my mother "Maybe your husband has run away to live with the Vietnamese?" My mother said, "No, he lost the cow, and he has gone to find the cow." One day, at twelve o' clock at night, they took my mother away. But I didn't know if they had killed her or not. The soldier Pol Pot keep my mother in the jail in the mountain. After one week I saw my mother going to work in the farm. My mother was very, very small. For one week she was not given food. So I kept a

little food for my mother and gave it to her when the soldier didn't see. I saw my mother for three days. On the last day, my mother took the gold she kept inside her bra. My mother gave me the gold and said, "Pu Ma, you take care of my son." My mother said goodbye.

I kept the gold. I lived with my children. Before, my big son and brother lived in Pol Pot school. But maybe they heard in the radio that the Vietnamese were coming, and all the children who were in school came back to live with their families. After some days a young Pol Pot soldier said, "Pu Ma, tonight at twelve o' clock they want to kill your family." So I ran again with my brother and my children.

It was raining that night, and it was very, very cold and very dark. We couldn't see. We were very scared. We sat under a tree. Maybe half an hour later the soldiers took the people to kill. I could see the soldiers smoking the cigarettes. When they finished smoking they started to kill. I could hear the children cry. Sometimes I heard the lady, she cried very loud. My children and I, we were very scared. I saw the communist Pol Pot smoke the cigarette again and they walked far away. I took my children and walked again.

When I lived in the mountain, I saw that after Pol Pot killed the husband, they killed the family. So I kept

the pan, water bottle, and rice in a basket to take if I ran away. I lived in the mountain for three days. Then I had no more rice, and no more water. I said to my brother and my son "I have no more water and no more rice. What will happen to us now?" My brother and my son went back to the farm in which we lived before. They went to see my friend. My friend said, "Oh my god! I thought you died." My brother said, "We ran. Now we live near the mountain." My friend gave some water and rice, and my brother and my son came back. When I saw my brother and my son I was very happy. I thought maybe they had got lost. When I had no more food, the Vietnamese came. In January 1979 my country was liberated. I was very happy.

Escape to Thailand

The Vietnamese asked me "Where did you live before?" I said I lived in Battambang. They said, "You can go back." I walked to Battambang. I lived with my aunt. Then my younger son got sick. I took my son to see the doctor, but after one week, my son, he died. I don't know, then I was maybe the same as crazy. When I saw the coconut tree my husband planted I cried every day. I had a lot of food. But when I thought about my husband and my mother who died with no food in their stomachs, I couldn't eat. I could only cry. When I lived with my aunt I made cakes to sell. My brother-in-law helped me. I got a lot of gold by

selling cake. But I had problems again with soldiers. They saw me and my aunt didn't have husbands, so they tried to take our gold. I got scared. I said to my aunt "I want to escape to live in Thailand." The next day my family and my aunt's family ran away to live in Thailand. We walked. We were very, very tired. I slept in the farms with other people who were running away. When the soldier saw us they shot at us. Then we slept in the jungle. Three days and three nights I walked with my family and with my aunt. We came to the border camp.

Life In Refugee Camps

We ran away from the country with nothing in our hands. When I came to the camp the Americans, they gave everything to us, like the clothes. Around the camp there were police and soldiers with guns. There was a fence and nobody could go outside. It was OK only to go to the mountain to bring firewood. In Khao-I-Dang camp I had problems with robbers. They came every night. People living in Khao-I-Dang camp didn't want to sleep in their homes. Sometimes they slept in the hospital. I was very lucky. One time the robbers came to my house, but I was sick. I said I had no money, and they went.

I lived in Thailand for two months and I got married. I was pregnant three months, and my husband went back to my

country. His wife was in Cambodia but he didn't tell me that before I married him. When I lived in the camp I learned to sew. I sewed baby clothes and ladies' clothes. When I finished sewing them I gave them to my teacher, and she gave them to poor people in the camp. Sometimes I made cakes for my daughter to sell. I planted cabbage, tomatoes, corn, and potato to sell. My children helped.

I lived in Thailand for four years. My sister came to USA and she sent me a letter. She said, "Come to America because Americans say when my country have no communists, they bring me back to Cambodia again." I applied to go to USA and I went for interview. They asked me about my life in Cambodia. "When you lived with Pol Pot what did you do?" I said, "I made the farm and I planted vegetables in the mountain." They said, "What kind of work did you do before Pol Pot?" I said, "I made the mattress in the factory with my husband." They asked, "Where is your husband?" I said, "My husband, he died." They said, "Did you see?" I said, "Yes." I didn't see Pol Pot killing my husband. But I saw Pol Pot tie my husband's hands and legs, and take him in the big truck to the mountain. But I know soldier Pol Pot, and he said, "Pu Ma, your husband died." But American didn't believe me about my husband. So he asked again and I cried. I missed my husband. So American said, "OK."

I went to interview two times. The American didn't believe me when I went to interview. My brother was also in Khao-I-Dang camp. He went for the interview and he said the wrong answers. The American said, "What job did your father do in Cambodia?" I said, "Soldier," but my brother said, "Farmer." Different answers. So the American said, "No, you don't go to live in America. Maybe you are crazy. If you are not crazy, your brother is crazy." I said, "No, I am not crazy." My brother's family and my family were separated. I came first, because my brother said things the wrong way. He interviewed three time. After the interview I went to Philippine camp. I studied English. My teacher in Philippine was very good. She taught me about going to the store, going to the hospital, in America.

Arrival in America

I came to America on January 28, 1985. When I took the airplane from Philippine to USA for two days, two nights, I was very tired. I didn't know how to eat American food. When I arrived in San Francisco, I didn't see my sister. I had the phone number. But I didn't know how to call. Another Cambodian helped me. I didn't have money. Some Americans and Cambodians gave me \$5, 10, 20. My sister said, "Take the bus." People helped me find the bus. Maybe after ten minutes after I got off the bus my

brother-in-law came to take me home.

I lived with my sister for one year in a downtown apartment. I lived for one month in America and I went to school. I studied English. My sister studied in the morning, I took my children and my nephew to school. I studied in the afternoon, my sister brought the children home. When I lived with the relative, I didn't get food stamp. If I lived separately I got food stamp. So I moved.

I moved in with a friend, but I had problems with my friend's mother. Sometimes she spoke with my children, but sometimes she wouldn't speak with my children. Sometimes my children took a shower, and she would get mad with my children. My friend came back from work at 3 o'clock at night, and he watched movies in the living room. My brother and my son slept in the living room, and they couldn't sleep well. When they went to school, they had problems. They studied but they didn't remember. My son said, "Mom can you move? I don't sleep well. I don't understand what I study." So I moved in with my aunt.

I get money from welfare every month. About \$890.00. I spend it on clothes for my children, food, rent, PG&E, telephone, and I pay the IRC for our tickets to come here. I don't have money to save. I am not happy about I get money from welfare. I want to go to work. Then I can get

a lot of money. But I know little English. I want to learn a lot of English. I also worry about my children. I have to make the food, get my daughter from school. Sometime my daughter goes to school, and she feels sick. Her teacher calls, and my aunt can't go. She does not speak English. I go to the office to get her. I am scared the bad man will take my daughter.

I understand about English language because I know my Cambodian alphabet. When the teacher say words in English, I write them in Cambodian letters. I think maybe if I didn't know Cambodian letters, I will not learn English. I can talk English words. But I have problem with past tense, present tense, future tense. When the teacher tells me to complete the sentence, I don't know. I write the first word (of the sentence) as the last word and the last word (of the sentence) as the first word. I think maybe I have a problem in my head.

Reflections, Perceptions, Adjustments

I am happy I live here because my children go to school and I don't have to pay. If my children are sick and go to see the doctor, I have Medicare. When they go to school they have a bus they can take. I think maybe when my children understand about English, and I know English, I will be happy. But I want to go back in my country. I

think because I lived there before for a long time, I miss it.

In my country people are very, very polite. When I walk, whoever walks behind, when they want to go first, they say, 'excuse me'. When they touch, they say, 'sorry'. The same as in this country. But in my country when I walk, when I see the old lady and old man, I say, 'Chumriep Sova' (traditional greeting, with palms together, to show respect). And when the old lady walks past me, I bow. (Pu Ma got up, and walked a few steps, bowing a little). My mother told whenever I saw the old lady and old man, I must bow and say, 'Chumriep Sova.' When we saw the monk walking on the street, we worshiped them. I think that is good. Because in Cambodia for a long time, it has been the same. My grandmother, grandfather, mother did the same. My mother said to me "Don't forget to show respect."

In this country, I go to the temple, I see the monks, I worship them. The first time when I lived here, when I went to school, I saw old people, I bowed. (The memory made her laugh). But my teacher told me "You don't have to bow." So I told my children "When you see the old lady, when you get too near the American, you can say 'excuse me.' If you have problem, you say 'sorry'. When you want to talk to your friend, say 'excuse me' first."

In this country I see some men are polite. My

classmates are very polite. When I don't understand English, they teach me; very polite. Sometimes Mexicans ask me "You like my country?" I don't know their country. "You like my language?" I say, "Yes I like, but I don't know how to speak it." They ask, "You want to learn? You teach me Cambodia, I teach you my language." Very polite. I like.

But some men are very impolite. When I went to school at night I saw a Mexican person standing in front of my car. He told me "I love you. You love me?" I said, "No." He stood in front of my car, so can I drive? He told me "If you love me, you can drive. This weekend I see you in the park." I said, "Yes," because I wanted to drive my car. In my country, we have love. But I say if you love someone you tell the parent first.

I like my children to go to school. But become man and woman (grow up) in America? No, I don't like, because America is different from my country. In my country when the man love the woman and he wants to get married, he tells mother and father. Here I see man and woman at the school, at the hospital, in the street, I don't like, because . . . different. (Pu Ma is embarrassed). I see the man and woman, kiss. I don't like that because I didn't see that before in my country. In my country people kiss, but after the man and woman get married. But kiss so

other people don't see.

I think about the future. People ask me if my daughter can marry with their son. But when I ask my daughter, she says she wants to go to school. I can't see my daughter when she is in school. I don't like my daughter having a boyfriend in the school the same as other people living here. When girls have boyfriends, they don't study. I say to my daughter if she has a boyfriend and if I know, I will hate it. I tell my daughter "When you go to school if you have a boyfriend, you must tell me. You tell your boyfriend to get married in the same way as in my country--to come and tell me first." She says she doesn't have a boyfriend. But she is too young now. Later, in the college, I think maybe she will have a boyfriend. When my husband died I took care of all children. I say to my daughter every night "When you get married, if you have a good husband, I am happy. If you get married with the bad husband, and if you separate with your husband, you can take care of your children?" I tell her "If you have a boyfriend your boyfriend must tell me before you get married. Then if you have problems, I will take care of you." My daughter says, "I love a person if mother loves him. If mother doesn't love that person I will not love also." But over a long time, she can change. I ask my daughter "You want to learn or you want to work?" My

daughter, she wants to learn a lot, she wants to be a nurse. In the summer she went to work, but she didn't like the work. She said maybe when she goes to college, when she knows how to write, she will apply in the doctor's office. My son and my brother, they want to fix the car, become mechanics. My son told me he is not smart. He told me he doesn't understand about English. He speaks English. He can read. But writing, no. So he doesn't want to learn in college.

My son and my brother, they don't have girlfriends. I know because when they go to school in the morning at 7:30, they come home in the afternoon at 3:30. They don't go anywhere else. When they want to go to visit another place they go with me. I believe them. But I told them when you have girlfriends, you tell me. When they tell me, I tell the mother of his girlfriend, the way we do in my country. My children are good, because my children are different from other children. They don't go anywhere. They stay at home. They study everytime. I don't see my children having bad friends. When the friends come in my home and ask my children to go to play somewhere else, they say no. They don't go because they want to study. My son, he wants to learn Cambodian too. Because my brother-in-law lives in Cambodia and sends letters. In my country they study a lot of Cambodian and French. No English.

If I live in Cambodia I won't have problems with my children. When they go to school they walk to school. When they go back they go home because in my country they don't have the car to go somewhere else with friends. I don't like my children to have the bad friend. The bad friend doesn't study, doesn't go to school. My children told me they saw another student who has four class, but goes for only two class. Then she goes to meet boyfriend, girlfriend, and sometimes go somewhere else. So I don't like my children have bad friends.

If my daughter got married to a Vietnamese I will not like it because my country has problems with Vietnamese. When I go to school, many Vietnamese men, they love me. But I say, "No, your country and my country have problems. You fight my country. I fight your country. You don't get married with me." The daughter of my friend, she got married with a Vietnamese man. My friend told me after her daughter got married she lived with her husband. Her husband went to work. He got money from work, but he didn't give money to his wife. He gave money to his mother. She had problems so she separated. If my children get married with Americans I think I will have problems because of different languages. I feel scared, that after they get married, they will have problem. If they have problems with Cambodians it is easy to speak. In Cambodia,

when children have problems, mothers take care of the children. It's not the same in America. Here after children are eighteen or nineteen parents don't take care. I think even if children over eighteen have problems I will take care of them.

I miss my country and my family. They send letters and pictures. They are very, very poor. They don't have food, don't have a house. In the rainy season they don't have rice. I don't have money to send to my family in Cambodia. One time I sent a small radio, and two watches. My family lives in Battambang. When I sent the radio, they collected it in Phnom Penh, far away. My brother-in-law, he took the bus both ways. He had to pay two thousand riel. My brother-in-law, he sold one radio and two watches for seven thousand riel. He kept five thousand. He paid to the bus two thousand. Very expensive.

In this country I have a lot of food. I think about my mother, and my husband who died with no food in the stomach. My mother and my husband were very, very polite. They didn't fight with other people. I don't know why Pol Pot kill them. I want to know why. I think if my mother and my husband came with me to this country, maybe I will be happy.

I think about my husband and mother. I dream about my husband and mother. Sometimes I dream about my husband

staying with me, but sometime not staying with me, I don't know why. I dream about my country. Never about my husband living in this country. I think maybe my husband has been born in Cambodia. Cambodia is far away from here. Maybe he didn't come here. I don't know. Last night I dreamed about my husband living with me, going to work. He took my children, went to buy the bicycle. One month ago I dreamed about my husband and my mother a lot, I don't know why. I asked my aunt "Maybe my husband and my mother are not yet born?" She said, "I don't know."

I dream about Pol Pot. When I dream about Pol Pot, I am not happy. I wake up, I say to my aunt and my children "I am not happy because last night I dream about Pol Pot." When I have problems with Pol Pot I have a problem about my head. I hurt in my chest. You see my chest? You see the hole? (She showed me an indentation on her chest, caused by the barrel of the gun poked into her chest by the Pol Pot soldier when she was being interrogated). The doctor X-rayed and he said, "No, no problem." When I have a headache I go to the doctor. He asks me "You think about what?" I say I think about my husband and my mother. The doctor say, "You don't think about them." But I don't forget, I remember.

When I have problems I think about my mother. I say to myself at night when I sleep, "My mother, I miss you. I

live here, I have a lot of problem, I miss you." When I lived with my husband before he died he thought about me. He took care of my mother, my children, and I. My husband didn't go elsewhere, and he didn't have bad friends. He was a very, very good man. Before he got married with me he smoked. When he get married with me, and I became pregnant, I said, "I don't like you smoking." So he didn't smoke. When I wanted to go to the restaurant with my husband, I would say, "You go to the restaurant with me?" My husband would say, "Why do you want to go to the restaurant? You can buy the food to make at home, and all can eat together." Because my husband, he lived in the country, in the farm. He liked to do everything together with the family. I miss my country. I miss my mother-in-law and brother-in-law. The Vietnamese store has Cambodian newspaper. I read Cambodian newspaper. It says my country will have independence soon. I want to go back. But I don't want communists again. If Pol Pots come again, I don't want to go back. Maybe when America go to help, I go back. I know my country is very poor. But I don't know why, I want to go back. Maybe because I lived in my country a long time before, and I miss it.

CHAPTER 9

KOUN SREY

Koun Srey means 'daughter'. As shown in her narrative, Koun Srey upholds traditional Cambodian values, and I chose this name for her because she displays the qualities of a traditional Cambodian daughter. At age sixteen, Koun Srey is a talented artist. Many of her drawings are of Cambodian village life based on books that her mother bought in Thailand. These books are among Koun Srey's greatest treasures. The story of Koun Srey's mother appears in Chapter 8.

Early Years

I was born in 1973, but my mom doesn't remember if it was July or January. She thinks it was July 1. I don't remember anything about my life before Pol Pot. I don't even remember what I looked like--whether I was skinny or fat. My mother says that in Cambodia I was fat and short, so my father called me. . . (she wouldn't mention the nickname, because it's funny). My real name I just use when I go to school. My mom still calls me. . . .

The Khmer Rouge Experienc

In Pol Pot time my mom had to go to work every day. So I stayed with my grandmother. I remember her face a little bit. She looked skinny. I don't think she looked normal. She looked worried. I used to wait at night for my mother and father to come back from work. My grandmother would call me to go to sleep, but I didn't want to sleep. I remember once seeing a man and a woman coming from the jungle and thinking they were my mother and father and running to them, but they were not them. I remember my little brother. I just remember his talking. (The brother died soon after Koun Srey's family returned to Battambang following the Vietnamese liberation).

When I was about five years old, I lived in the small camp near the mountain with my grandmother, mom, dad, uncle, and my two brothers. One afternoon I went to take a bath with my brother at a lake far away from my house. When we were coming back home, I saw a woman going up a tree. She had long hair and wore a white cloth. When she was at the top of the tree, she disappeared. I ran home quickly and told my parents about the woman who disappeared, and my parents said it was a ghost. But when I was small, I was never scared about ghosts, because I never saw what their faces looked like. I saw a ghost for the first time when I went to the lake, but I only saw her

back.

During Pol Pot time, there was only a little food, and they let us eat only at a particular time. We were not allowed to eat at other times. One time, I had to stay in the cafeteria where they put all the children with no mother and father. I remember there was yam in the cafeteria and I wanted to eat them. But I didn't, because if the Pol Pots saw me, they would think I stole the food. At night I had to walk back to my house. My eyes would close because I was so sleepy, and once I hit against a cow. The owner of the cow took me away. One day I stepped on a baby chicken. The chicken belonged to a girl called Nardei. The chicken died. I ran away.

I don't remember the faces of Pol Pot soldiers. I only remember the black clothes and the scarves they used to wear. The Pol Pots never took me to their children (to the children's camps). When children ran away they put the mom and dad in jail, so I never ran away.

Escape to Thailand

When I was six years old, I ran away from my country with my mother, brothers, and my uncle, to Thailand. When we were running away, I slept in the jungle, and helped my mom to carry some things. At night when my uncle and my brothers were asleep, I saw my mom wasn't asleep. I knew she was thinking about the children and about the future.

Life in Refugee Camps

In 1980, I got into Khao-I-Dang Refugee Camp. The houses in the camp were not yet fixed, so my family lived in a small house that had a wall on one side and a broken roof. I lived there about two months, and then moved to another house. That house was new and a lot of people lived there. Americans gave rice and meat to people in the camp. Some people died in the camp. In the camp I saw a man selling water, so I went to buy water. One bowl of water cost 1.00 bhat but my mother didn't have money. So the man just gave us water. He was nice. He had been in Cambodia too, but had come to camp a long time ago.

Khao-I-Dang camp had a market like in Battambang. My mom planted things to sell at the market. When I was about eight or nine years old, I went to school with my uncle and my older brother every day. I learned to read Cambodian. I went to school at 8 o'clock, and came back home at 11:30. We had only one class. We did not change classes like in high school here. When we came back from school we had to work in the garden. During weekends I went to the mountain with my family and my neighbor to get fire wood. I went to the river and the lake to bathe. During Cambodian New Year I went to the temple, and we played Cambodian games. I liked living in the camp very much. In 1984 my family and

I went to Philippines camp, to come to America. Although I live in USA now, I will never forget my life in Khao-I-Dang camp.

Arrival in America

I got in the airport in San Francisco on January 28, 1985. I didn't know if it was morning or evening, but it was very cold! After we came out of the airport, we rode a bus for a long time before we got home. That was the first time I rode a bus. The windshield in the bus was green. So I thought the sky was green too. I remember thinking, "Oh, American sky is different from Cambodia or Thailand sky." I was quiet in the bus. I didn't say anything; I didn't know English. My mother was tired. I was tired. I just looked out of the window at the American landscape. The weather looked very cold. I rode the bus from San Francisco to a downtown city. When I got off I saw my uncle. They came to USA a long time ago, maybe 1983.

When I got off the bus, I rode the car, but I didn't know how to ride the car. The car went too fast. When the car went fast, the landscape went fast too, and I felt dizzy. Afterwards I went to school everyday in the bus, and I always felt dizzy. We just walked in Cambodia. We never rode the bus or car. One time I rode the truck from Cambodia to Khao-I-Dang camp, and that time I felt dizzy too.

We lived in my uncle's apartment. It had only two rooms. There were seven people in his family, and five people in my family. So there were twelve people in the apartment. Downtown was very narrow, with a lot of houses. There was no place to play. When I came back from school I had to stay in the house. Just stay in the room. It was so dark. I felt sick and I got headaches. After one year I moved to New Drive. I liked New Drive better, because downstairs, there were many people to play with.

When I first came to America, some black people were very mean. The first time I went to school, I didn't want to stay in America. I wanted to go home. There were only five Cambodians in my school, but there were a lot of Vietnamese, and Spanish-Americans. The children would say something to us, but they wouldn't just say--they pulled my hair, my hand, jumped over my head. We didn't do like that in my country. In my country my religion is good. My religion tells people to do good things, not bad things. I thought these people don't have a religion. My friend cried. I didn't cry. I felt angry. But I couldn't say anything because I didn't know how to speak English. My mom bought me a bicycle to go to school. It was broken, and then someone stole it. I felt sad. I didn't want someone to steal my bicycle like that. English has not been very easy for me to learn. I can look up words in the

Cambodian-English dictionary because I know how to read Cambodian. But English has long, hard words I don't know how to read or to pronounce. Sometimes even when my teacher explains to me, I don't understand. Sometimes if he makes a sentence, then I understand.

Love and Marriage

My mom wants me to take care of myself, so she advises me to study a lot. If I get a good education, when I want to marry, I can know if a man is good or bad. When my mom was young, a lot of men liked her. When she worked with my father, they were just friends at first. Then when she knew he was a good man, she married him. If I have a boyfriend and if she knew about it, she will advise me. I do what my mom says. I have a boy who likes me, but I don't want to have a boyfriend. I want to just keep studying. If you have boyfriends and girlfriends, you forget about learning, and think only about writing letters. I never go out at night or alone. I go with my mom or stay at home. I studied in America for three years, I have gone to birthday parties with friends, but not at night. I just go in the afternoon. If somebody dances with a boy, I think that's no good. But I go on picnics with my teacher and friends. We have to take sex education for science class, or we won't pass. Once the teacher

showed a movie. My friend said it was not a good movie so I didn't watch. My teacher didn't say anything. I just put my head down. I heard a boy laugh. Some old people say when some girls are 18 or 19 years old, they get pregnant before they marry. They say that's no good. So they tell their children "Just go to school and keep learning." Some fourteen or fifteen-year-old girls in America have boyfriends. In my country it is never like that. In America when some girls go to parties they fall in love, they elope, and they marry. After some time, the guy doesn't love that girl anymore. He leaves her, and she comes home, but her parents don't take her back. The girl has a baby, that guy has another girl, and she is alone.

I hope to get married when I go to my country. In this country, some people marry fast and separate fast too; American or Cambodian. American children can go anywhere without their parents when they are 18, 19, 20 years old. I think their religion says it is all right to go out. But in my country, it is different. In my country, children stay with the parents. If they marry they can go out. If they are not married, they stay at home. I want to live with my mother. I don't want to get away from my parent. Parent can advise you to be good. But I wish to be a boy in my next life because the boys can work and then go away. The parents cannot let girls go away. I watch movies which

show 18, 19, year old Americans go anywhere with their boyfriends and girlfriends. But their mothers don't say anything. They don't care about their children. They feel happy that their children have boyfriends and girlfriends when they are over 18. In my country it's not like that. Cambodian parents care about their children. I know, because they tell their children to be good. They want the children to have one husband, one wife; not many. If husbands die, they can marry again if they want to. Parents have to look after children. I will tell you a story. It's from our history, from the past, a long long time ago:

The Human Birds

This story is about three kids. Three girls. Their father died, so they just had a mother. After sometime the mother married again, and she only liked her husband. She did not care about her kids. She would go out with her husband, and the kids were left alone. So her husband said, "You take care of the kids. I will go out with my friend, who is a man." But she took her kids to the jungle, and left them there. So the good angels in the jungle helped the kids. They made food for them. But after about three or four years, the kids were like animals. They ate food without cooking. After the mother left the kids and went back, the stepfather stole some money and he got caught. He went to jail. So the mother was alone. She missed her kids. So she went to the forest to call them, but it was too late. By now the kids had wings, and they flew away. So she lost the kids because she did not look after them.

The old people tell us this story. I think sometimes the old people in this country look sad. They want to get back. The young people, they want to live here. They know

only about this country. My cousin drives a car. He is a guy, but he has long hair. Once when he came to my house, he brought lots of girls in his car. My mom and grandaunt advised him. He listened; he didn't say anything, but he did not come again. He was angry. Sometimes in this country, the young people don't want to go to temple. They only want to go to parties. I go to the temple. I pray for my father, my little brother, grandmother, all those who died. At New Year time all my (dead) relatives come to eat food, and make my family happy.

Reflections, Perceptions, Adjustments

I always think about the past, about living in the camp. Here we grow up too fast. We eat a lot of food. I think in this country the days go faster. I like to stay in my country. In my country I worked in the garden. I grew vegetables: potatoes, onions, tomatoes. Here, we don't do any physical work but the days go too fast.

I like this country when I go to school. I went to work in the summer, but I found school was easier than work. I think there were about five other Cambodians working there. There were more Chinese. When I worked, sometimes I had to stand the whole day. My legs hurt very much. It's difficult work for old people. All the people who work there speak little English. If we stay in our country we speak Cambodian, so it's easy for us to find a

job. In this country it is easy to find a job too, if you speak English.

All the money I got from the job, I gave my mother. She has to buy food and clothes for us. Sometimes she gives me \$5.00, but I don't use it. Sometimes my friends borrow 50 cents, but if a person does not give it back, I don't let them borrow again. I let them borrow only one time. I say I don't have money if they ask me again. When I go to the store I never buy anything. My mom buys for me the things I need. Sometimes I have to tell her what clothes and things I like.

After my job was over, I stayed at home for one and a half months, because there was nobody to take me anywhere. I was so bored! I wished my friend could come, but she went to Stockton. I have my cousin in Stockton. I wished to go to visit their house, but there was no one to drive me. After coming to America in 1985, I have gone two times to Stockton, one time to San Francisco, and one time to Oakland. Stockton is very narrow, it's not a big place. My uncle goes fishing in Stockton, but he sleeps there. I don't want to sleep in Stockton. It's too noisy. There are lots of children. At my cousin's house they don't open the windows because children play around the house, and they are worried that the children will break mirrors and things. So it's always dark in their house.

I would like to live in the farm. I have not seen Phnom Penh or Bangkok, but I think all big cities are the same. In the farm we can have more fun than in the city. We can go fishing in the river. In the city we just ride the car. In the farm we can walk. I think walking is more fun than riding the car. If you walk slowly, you can see things. If you are lucky you can find something. My brother found a small statue of Buddha in Philippine.

I like this country. Most people are kind, and some people are mean, it's the same as in my country. I have good teachers. I have lots of friends, Cambodians and Vietnamese; Vietnamese from their country. Some Cambodians are angry with Vietnamese, but the Vietnamese in my school are kind. They play basketball with Cambodians. The only problem is, they make noise in class. Some students work quietly, but some people are modern. They have new ways. They say, "shut up." I just say, "quiet," but then if they don't listen, I stop saying. I never fight with anybody. I just make friends. Some Cambodian boys make trouble with Spanish people. I have no trouble with anybody.

I have American friends, but they are friends only in class. Like when break time comes they go to their friends, and I go to my friends. I have never been in an American house, and no American people have come to my house. I don't know what to say to the American people. I

just go to math and PE with American students. I have ESL with Vietnamese, Cambodian and Spanish students. Some Americans don't do math homework, so they come to ask me. Sometimes if I don't understand I ask them too. I think it's important to help people. My religion says, "Do good things, kind things, to people." Before the Buddha was born on this earth, people killed, did bad things. But when Buddha was born, he taught people to do good things. Some Cambodian people like Pol Pot will never do what they did if they knew our religion. This is what the people say. I learn the Cambodian religion from my mom. The old people know a lot of things because they were born a long time ago. The young people were born after the old, so they must learn from old people. Cambodian religion says it's not polite to call old people by name. The young people have to be polite to the old people, friends, neighbors. I call by name only people who are young like me. People older than me, I don't call by name. I call them grandmother or aunt.

My religion says it's not good to kill. But if I have a gun, and if my heart is angry, I will shoot the Pol Pot soldier who killed my father. Sometimes my mother talks about my father, and she cries. She talks about Pol Pot not giving food to my father. She talks about how my father got burnt when Pol Pot threw coals into the jail,

and the coal fell on my father's leg. I think it's good to take revenge for a parent. But in America I cannot kill the Pol Pot soldier. This country is different from my country. In my country if someone kills Pol Pots, people don't care. They wish Pol Pot will die. But in this country I will go to jail if I kill the Pol Pot soldier.

I am happy in this country, but my country I have never seen. So I want to live in my country too. I want to see my uncle, my aunt, and my cousins. If I live in this country, I wish to go to college. But in 1991, I will go to twelfth grade, and then I hope I go to Cambodia. I listened to a Sihanouk speech on a cassette. He says Cambodia will have freedom in 1991. There will be no communists in our country. I would like to go back then.

I miss my country. I worry about my brain; it's not very good. I learn English, but sometimes I forget a lot of words. I don't know why. I worry that we speak little English. Now I am a freshman in high school, and I hope I speak more English when I graduate, but we have to find work, find a job. I think I am not going to work here. I don't want to work here. I like to go to Cambodia to work because I don't speak a lot of English.

I don't speak English at home. My parent knows little English. In my house, we often speak Cambodian. When we go to some other house, we talk Cambodian. When I

talk in English to my friend, some people think I want to forget my language. If I am Cambodian, I have to remember my language. It's important for my country. When I go back to my country I will not speak English again. If I don't go back, then I will stay here. But some people, they talk a lot of languages, but they don't forget their language. I think it's okay if my little sister doesn't speak good English now. She is in first grade. She'll speak two languages when she grows up.

I don't know about my future in this country. I don't think about my future, things like going to work, and having lots of money to buy a house or cars. I think I will go to work, but I don't know what work. In my country I will work in the farm, or factory, like my mom. I will grow some vegetable and sell at the market, like in Khao-I-Dang camp. Growing vegetables is hard work, but I will feel happy, so it will not be hard work. In this country, it is hard to think about my future. I like to go back. If I go back to my country I will not forget that I lived in the USA. I will come back to visit America.

CHAPTER 10

BOPHA

Bopha means 'flower'. The narrator chose this name because her father had sometimes called her Bopha, and she likes the meaning of the word. It suits her well; at thirty-nine, she looks refreshingly young.

Bopha's narrative illustrates the anti-Vietnamese attitudes of the Khmer people, the effects of government corruption on Cambodian society, and her life as a refugee in Vietnam before escaping to the United States.

Early Years

I was born in Phnom Penh. I belonged to a middle class family, not rich, not poor. I had five sisters and one brother. I was the oldest child. My father was half Vietnamese, half Chinese. He grew up in Cambodia, and went to work in Vietnam. He married in Vietnam, and had three children by his first wife. But his wife did not want to come to Cambodia because her parents were old. So my father came back by himself and married my mother. She was Vietnamese. Mom was about nineteen years old when my father married her. He was about forty. He worked as a civil officer. In Cambodia, Vietnamese and Chinese people

had to pay 700 riel (Cambodian currency) per person as taxes. My father collected their taxes and did their identity cards.

We had a big house. My grandmother had given it to father. But when my father was working in a place like the City Hall, two Vietnamese people stole a lot of money, and escaped to Cambodia. My mom told me that some people told my father to help those Vietnamese men for a fee. But he refused, though he could have got much money, because he would have got into trouble. But other people in the City Hall faked his signature, used his stamp, and helped the Vietnamese. Police came and surrounded our house. Father said he was innocent, but because his signature and stamp were on the document, they took him to a holding center where they kept him. Later, the guilty people were discovered and father was released. After the problem with the Vietnamese men and the money, my father got a new job. We moved to Kompong Speu when I was six year old.

My father's new job was like his old job, but not as political. But the police chief in Kompong Speu was corrupt. He told my father to charge 100 riel more from each Chinese and Vietnamese person. The chief would take 80 percent and my father could keep 20 percent. But my father refused, because the identity cards would have his signature, and he would get into trouble. The police chief

was angry and said he would transfer my father to a forest area where there was malaria. There was little food, and new people could not survive there. Only generations who always lived there can exist there. My mother was scared to go because the children might have died. So my father said he can go by himself and come home once a month. Then the person above the police chief heard my father was doing a good job, and wanted him to stay.

My father was too good. He would not do anything wrong. Other people were very corrupt. Everybody thought we were rich because of corruption. My father had a very large house and a car in Phnom Penh. But in Kompong Speu he had a Vespa motor scooter, and then a motor cycle, a motorized cycle, and finally, a bicycle. We lived in a small wooden house. If some relatives gave us money because my father or my mother helped them, he would not let us keep it. My mother said if they gave money because we helped them, then it was all right to accept it. But my father said if he accepted the money he would teach his children to be corrupt. He said God knew he was honest. Sometimes my mom would get mad with him. She would say "You are so honest. So now eat your honesty and fill your stomach."

Because we did not have enough money my mom had to work too. She started to bring things like cloth, perfume,

powdered milk, and batteries from Vietnam to sell in Cambodia. She went to Vietnam by Marine. Marine was a big boat in which soldiers went. We were always worried when she went because the boats were sometimes bombed by the Khmer Rouge. When the newspapers reported that a boat was bombed, we would be depressed and worried if it happened close to a day my mom was coming back. And then we would be so happy when we saw her. It was illegal to bring expensive things like gold and jewels, but sometimes she smuggled them back too. She sewed things inside the seam of her sarong. When she was checked by officers she would remove her sarong and shake it, holding the place which had the valuables. Sometimes she was arrested, but she was freed because of my father's name and position. Sometimes he had to go and talk to the people who arrested her. Father did not like mom doing this business, but she said "I have no choice."

Mom did a lot of work. She loaned money and collected interest. But my mom was a very kind person, and mostly she got tricked. People took her money but didn't give it back. I told her she must not give money to people. But thick faced people (thick skinned people) would come and say their child was dying, and my mom couldn't stand to hear that. At the beginning of the month people got salaries. So every first week of the month I

had to go and collect money my mom had loaned to the market people. When I was young, my servant came with me. Later, I went by myself on my bicycle. But people would say that they had no money. So I cried and said, "If you don't give me money, my mom will beat me." Some people tried to please me by giving me food. Later I learned that I must not eat the food, because then I couldn't ask for money. Some people hid when they saw me coming. Sometimes I was mad with my mom because she gave money to these people, and my mom had to plead with me to collect her money. I was still mad, but I went because I felt sorry for her.

Sometimes my mom beat me. For example, school started at 7 a.m. and my mom woke me up at five or six. But I was still sleepy, so I would sit on the step. Then my mom used the switch. We did not have a refrigerator, so some days she would tell me to go and buy ice from the store. If I was mad with her, I would put the big ice block in my bicycle basket, and then go over big holes in the street. The ice would fall and break into pieces. So, I took the small piece of ice home to my mother. I felt it was not fair to scold me and switch me, and then use me. But mom had to let go of her anger because she had a lot of kids. She had to discipline her kids because they had to learn to behave well.

I respect my mom. She was kind, helpful and

reasonable. She helped people by giving them injections. She learned to do that from father. He had a pharmacist's certificate. If people gave her money when she gave them injections she accepted it. But if the people were poor, she did not take money from them for her services. She took money only for medicine. I am like my mom too. I believe if it's your job to help people, you should not accept money. But if it is not your job, and you help them, it is all right to accept money if the people are not poor.

I went to a boys' and girls' school. Girls sat in the front and boys sat in the back. Boys usually wanted to talk with the girls, but the girls would not talk. My teacher trusted me a lot. When I said I would do something, I did it. I was a class leader. We had agriculture in Cambodia. Teachers grew good plants with the right agricultural methods. Class leaders had to water the plants. I had to assign work to other leaders. But leaders were mostly boys because they were free to go anywhere. So when I met other leaders I couldn't even say "Hi" because they were boys. One thing about myself though, I was good in studies, and I was pretty too. So I didn't need to talk to boys.

School in Cambodia was not like here. It's easier to study here. You only compete with yourself. If you do

good work, you get 'A'. But in my country, you got 10 maximum points. Then you got an average point for the whole class. It was so hard to compete. But I was a good student. I remember I was the smartest in the family. I was always first or second best in class. But my sisters and brother, they were fourth or fifth or worse. I am not Cambodian by blood, but I write well in Cambodian. I wrote good essays and reports--opinions on Cambodian stories like English story Romeo and Juliet. My father always showed my report card to his friends. I was proud when he did that, but I felt shy for him because his friends' kids probably did well too.

We had proverbs hanging on school walls. They said things like "Know from learning" and "If you try hard, you always reach your goal." I still think of those proverbs when I try to help my friends. When they say they can't find jobs, or they can't learn English because they have poor memories, I say, "If you learn one word every day, in ten days you will know ten words. You have to try hard."

In school I had a hard time because I was not Cambodian. In history class, teacher would say, "Vietnam did this or that to Cambodia." In the street, people would say, "That female Vietnamese," and not "The Vietnamese lady" when they talked about Vietnamese people. So I tried to look as Cambodian as possible. But my friends never

cared whether I was Vietnamese or Chinese or Cambodian. I had many best friends. We played with each other, we talked about culture, and even about discrimination. If some family had some celebration, some nice food, we invited each other. We shared everything. During the day we would form a group and study together. If someone had a good idea, they would share it. Most of the time I had the good ideas in math and physics, because I had my boyfriend, who was older, to help me. He helped all my sisters and brothers too.

During the days we didn't go to school, we went in a group, boys and girls, to pick fruit in the forest. Or we played in the river. My house was near the temple. The temple had two little houses with two statues. They were the statues of two gods, a man and a woman. The gods liked children. So other kids and I used to take the statues and give them a bath in the river. People gave them offerings such as food, incense, and cigarettes. If someone did not give the gods everything they liked, I got money from the people, ran to my mother's shop and got the things. I did not do it because I wanted money for mother's shop, but I felt the people had to do the right thing. Otherwise the gods will not be happy, and the people will not get what they wanted. Afterwards, the kids and I took the food and offerings home. The oldest person got the biggest share of

food.

My family was Buddhist. Buddha tells me if I do something good, I will receive good. If I do bad, then I will receive bad. If you grow good seed, you get good fruit. It's like that. But more than that, I believed about the spirit. Near my house, there was a priest. He never ate anything that had blood; he was a vegetarian. He helped everyone of any race. When he died, every house had his picture to pray to. Sometimes when my mom had problems she prayed to him, and he helped her. Once I lost my slipper. It was new, and I knew my mom would beat me. I was scared. I prayed to him. I said, "If you are true, show me my slipper." In the night, I dreamed my slipper was under the house (Cambodian houses were generally built on stilts). In the morning I found it there. I had experience with the priest, so I believe in him.

The Khmer Rouge Experience

When the Khmer Rouge and Lon Nol soldiers were fighting like in 1972, our house in Kompong Speu was burnt and we did not have a house. We walked from Kompong Speu to Phnom Penh, about 20 kilometers, to stay with our father's sister. She had a big two-story house. The house belonged to her, but the land belonged to my father. My father's sister let us stay in a small wooden house behind

her big house. But her son didn't like that because he wanted the property. He told his mom to get rid of us. At that time my mom was very ill with ulcer. Her illness cost all the money we had. I had just got the diploma, and I was willing to go to work. I told my father I needed to get a job as an air plane stewardess with Air Cambodia. So my father helped me to write the resume. In Cambodia we did not have forms to fill. We wrote our own story when Air Cambodia advertised over the radio. My friend told me I got the job. But my boyfriend didn't like me to get a job there. Air stewardesses sat on the lap of Americans when Americans gave them a lot of money. Especially my cousin-in-law said that if I did like that I will become like a wild woman; not a nice girl. So I did not go to work there.

During the time my mom was ill, my father's sister's son kicked us out of that house and we went to live with my mother's adopted sister. Then he sent two gang persons with guns to my father and those people said my father had to sign the paper giving the house to my cousin. They said if he didn't sign, they will kill him. So my father signed, but my mom was so mad. She threw everything she found at my father. But if he didn't sign they would have killed him.

At that time my father and mother could not agree

about an operation for my mother. It needed too much money. So my father read his pharmacy books and gave her just two injections. She got well. She told me to go back to school. After that we rented a place in Phnom Penh and my mom and father lived there with the younger children. My sister, brother, and I lived with our cousin-in-law, close to our school.

In 1975 I was a first year medical student. On April 17, Pol Pot soldiers came and said Americans were going to bomb the city, and tried to chase us out to the forest for three days. My cousin didn't want to go. We hid till the 19th, but then on the 19th, the soldiers came looking in the houses. The man opposite my cousin's house, he was a fat Chinese business man, was shot. They kicked the mother, and told her to go with the children. So we got out very quickly.

My cousin-in-law was very rich. Her husband was an importer and an exporter. Before we left she hid a lot of money and diamonds in the stove, in ashes, in chimney. She sewed a pocket in a pillow and hid about a cup of gems and took them. She took another pillowcase filled with money, to buy gold. At check points we passed those pillows quickly down the line. We pretended they were already checked.

We walked very slowly. There were so many people.

If we walked fast, we would have got separated from our family. We walked for about a week. I saw mothers who just had babies, being carried on a cloth tied to two poles (stretchers). They couldn't walk. They were still in pain. On the first day just about a mile from our house, we stopped to eat. I walked across this shelter for babies whose mothers had given babies away. I heard a baby crying in the shelter. I remember counting 48 cradles. I saw that some babies were already dead. There were twins in the same cradle, and one was dead, one was alive. Some babies were still crying, but there was no voice. (Here, Bopha made a hoarse noise, looking upwards, gasping for breath). Because we waited till the 19th to leave, those babies had been there for three days already with no food. Some had crawled out and fallen. So people had put rice on banana leaves and a can of water on the floor. One child was sitting up and eating. His stomach was full, but he still ate. (Bopha sat on the floor, and with a glazed look, took her hand to her mouth, with all five fingers spread apart). I thought one child was dead, so I pulled him to a side and covered him. I wanted to leave him in a nice place. Then I saw him move. I got so frightened. I asked my cousin if I could take him, but she scolded me. Oh, God, I felt very bad.

We slept on the road at night, and walked till we got

to the forest. All the people were told to cut wood. I was very scared of worms and snakes. I screamed when I saw them, and disrupted the group. Worms fell from trees in the day time. People put their kramars under their heads for pillows and slept on the ground. But I could not sleep because I did not want worms falling on me. Khmer Rouge told us to work in rain and sun. I was not used to hard work, and I would stand under trees when it rained, and take shelter from the sun. But the soldiers scolded me saying, "Now hang your pen and your certificate on the tree and use the ax instead." That hurt me very much. I felt very sad and hopeless. I had gone to school for thirteen years, and I didn't get anything.

I used to argue with the soldiers and tell them when I thought they were wrong. I did not cry when I was angry with the soldiers because with the person I respect, I can cry. But with the person who is mean like the Khmer Rouge, I can control myself because I am a kind of a very strong person too. But my neighbor said one soldier asked her if I was the wife of a higher officer of the army because of my clothes and the way I spoke. She had said I was not such a wife. So I decided not to talk again. It was too dangerous. A Khmer Rouge lady told me that later on they would choose me to marry a handicapped Pol Pot soldier (e.g., an amputee), and that I will have no choice. I felt

so depressed and helpless. At that time we still had a lot of food, but I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep. I thought if they chose me to marry a handicapped soldier, I will kill myself.

In the forest we lived very close to the Vietnam border. My mother had gone to Vietnam for business just before my country fell. So she got stuck there. We all had the same goal; to go to Vietnam to meet my mom. We heard that some people who went to catch fish in the river swam to Vietnam and escaped. So my brother, sister and I planned to do that. We knew Vietnam was communist also, but we heard they didn't chase people out of their houses. At that time we did not have the idea to escape to a third country like France, only go to Vietnam. But then I got malaria, and we could not go. Then Vietnamese soldiers were allowed to take their people back to Vietnam because at that time, Vietnamese and Pol Pot soldiers were still friends. I was too sick to walk, so somebody took me in a cow cart to the boat. The boat had two stories. They put me downstairs because I was so sick. We got to Vietnam on June 1.

A Refugee in Vietnam

I was lying on a stretcher when the boat came to Vietnam, but I heard my sister say to my brother, "Brother Than, I see someone who looks just like the shape of our

mom!" A lot of people had come to the place where the boat came to see if their relatives had escaped. I heard them call, "Mom, Mom," and oh, I was so excited. I wanted to get up, but I was so ill, I was shaking and I couldn't get up. They carried me on the stretcher and my mom was holding my brother and sister, hugging them and crying. She saw me, but she didn't recognize me. I was so thin and sick. She said, "Poor child, she is so ill. I feel she's like my child." Then my sister said, "It's sister Bopha, Mom", and my mom ran and held me, crying. Then she ran and hired a trishaw and took me to hospital. I was in hospital in Vietnam for one month.

My aunt had a house in Vietnam, and we stayed with her. But life was so difficult. We didn't have anything because we couldn't take any jewelry from my mom's house in Cambodia because the soldiers would not allow us to go to our villages. I took some of my jewelry, but I lost them. My mom was upset because I didn't go home and take her jewelry. She had a lot that she was keeping for me and my sisters. She did not understand that soldiers did not allow us to go any place we wanted to. She scolded us a lot.

I was old enough to work, and I would have done any job, cashier, clerk, anything. But I did not speak Vietnamese, and you needed influence to get a job. So I

had to depend on my mom. One day my mom went to another city and bought two kilograms of chili. She wanted to dry it and use it. Chili was expensive in the town we lived in and I told mom "Why don't we sell it mom?" My mom couldn't believe I would go to every house and sell chili. I had never done it before. She said, "You dare to sell it?" I asked my sister "You will be my partner? We will go together, and you hold the paper to wrap, I carry the basket on my head." But my sister was embarrassed to sell things like that on the street. She walked far away from me. Then we went and sat in the market. She covered her face with the kramar. I felt embarrassed too, because we had not sold things like that. But my mom said, "You are selling something, not stealing things from others, so it's OK." And I thought, "These people in Vietnam don't know me, so I will not worry." When I finished selling I made about three times profit. My mom was so proud, but we were still embarrassed. So we sold things in the market only once in a while after that.

There was a lot of crime and robbery in Vietnam, so we had to be very careful. When Cambodians sold fruit they let you taste the fruit, even a whole bunch. But Vietnamese shouted, "Did you come from the forest? Don't you know you don't taste fruit?" They put rotten fruit in the bottom of the bag, and put some good fruit on top.

Cambodians never stole people's necklaces. But Vietnamese stole. They cut people's pockets and took money. I lost many bicycles in Vietnam. I was so frustrated. But Vietnam is poor. Some city people are honest, but in Cambodia, except for the government people, wherever they lived, people were honest. But Vietnamese didn't discriminate against Cambodians in Vietnam. Later I met a woman who was my mother's business friend. She was like my adopted mother. She gave me jewelry she could not sell, to sell in my town, and gave me commission. So I did not need capital to do business.

My father escaped to Vietnam separately by himself. When he was evacuated he had my grandmother and two younger sisters with him and they went to a relative's village. When they walking my grandmother became too exhausted. She could not walk anymore. So my father left her in place that was like a resting place for travelers and went across the river to my cousin's. He told my grandmother to wait there until he came back with my cousin. But it took him several hours to get to my cousin's house, and later they couldn't find her. So he left the two youngest children, one five years and one fourteen years, with my cousin. My father was a civil officer and he thought people would identify him. My cousin's husband was a military policeman. They were 'old residents' of the village and

communists. My father left the children with the relatives because they had a lot of food. Later my father escaped to Vietnam. But one year after he escaped he died of depression. He lost his will to live. We don't know what happened to our grandmother.

My 14-year-old sister later told me that after my father left them with the relatives, she was sent away to work in the rice field. My little sister was only five, but the relatives had been so mean to her. They had made her do all the work. If their children cried they hit my sister because they said she fought with them. She had been so thin. She had no food to eat, no school, no religion. She had suffered so much. The communists had once given a piece of palm sugar to my little sister. She had been very hungry but she saved a piece of the sugar for her older sister. She had given it to another person to give to her sister. But that woman was hungry too. So she ate that piece of sugar. My older sister never got it. When she came back to the village my younger sister asked her if she got the sugar, but she never got it.

When the Vietnamese went to Cambodia after liberation my mom went back to the village to look for her youngest child and her mother. But the neighbors told her my cousin's husband was killed because he was a policeman. My cousin's mother-in-law was killed because she had

Vietnamese blood. They had told the old lady to go to a new place and my cousin went too because she was a widow. And my youngest sister, she went because she was too young. Nobody saw them again. My other sister was saved because she was away in the rice field. When I heard how my sister died, I felt so angry. I felt if I met the guy who killed my sister I would want to do something. I could not have used a knife or a gun, I will never kill people, but I wanted to beat him.

My mom came back to Vietnam. She was very depressed. My mom was the youngest child and she was like a baby too. When my mom lost her youngest child and her mother, she went crazy. Whenever she saw a little girl, she called her. She ran to her. I got very scared because people would think she was a crazy woman. In the night she pulled down the mosquito net and she wept. She scolded father, me and my sisters saying, "You have animal hearts. If I knew you did not love your grandmother and sister, I would not have raised you so big. You left your grandmother and sisters there and didn't even go back to find them. Why didn't you stay there? Why did you come to see my face?" She scolded us a lot. I could not stand it. She scolded us so much but we could not have saved them. It was not our fault. But my mom didn't understand that. My relatives did mean things like that because they were

hungry too. When you have everything you can be nice to people. You can share. But when you are hungry and don't have anything, you become mean. My mom still believes that one day she will find her daughter. Many times she goes to orphans houses to look for her.

I went to Vietnam to get away from the labor force, but I couldn't stand my mom's scolding. One time I went to the Cambodian border and stayed there, waiting for the boat to go back. Other people who came to Vietnam from Cambodia also waited there to go back. They couldn't survive in Vietnam. They missed family. They didn't have money. We all felt helpless, hopeless. I had heard that the Pol Pots took people to new land and people couldn't stay where they wanted. But I thought it was OK. I was angry with my mother. She blamed us for what we couldn't do. I thought if I went back I will find my sisters and my boyfriend. I also thought when I went back to Cambodia my mom will not blame the others because I had already sacrificed myself. I was so afraid to go back but I tried to take the risk. So I went to the border. Then my mom sent a Chinese guy who stayed at our house to bring me back. He said, "If you don't go back I can't go back also." So I went back to my mother. When I came back mom didn't say anything, but she didn't complain much anymore. She knew if she scolded I would leave. I had already spent a whole day at the

border.

I tried twice to escape from Vietnam by boat, but the first time, the boat broke. I lost four ounces of gold and the soldiers discovered us. We all ran and I hid in a house. The second time, I got tricked. Then when Vietnam liberated Cambodia, I escaped back to Cambodia because my mom had heard there were refugee camps and people could go to third countries.

Escape to Thailand

When I escaped from Cambodia I went part way with soldiers in a truck. I paid them. Then I went to the border first in a cow cart and then on a bicycle. We had more than ten bicycles and carts in our group when we escaped. I wore a black shirt, black pants, and put a scarf around my head to cover my face because my skin was too white. Cambodians are dark skinned. I got to the border, and other Cambodians told me about Khao-I-Dang Refugee Camp. Before I came to Khao-I-Dang camp I stayed in a UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) border camp. A Cambodian soldier said he will take me to Khao-I-Dang camp, but I didn't trust him. UNHCR buses took people to Khao-I-Dang, and I went in a bus. There was a Cambodian leader there who was very proud. Those who pleased him and his wife had much to eat. They were like

kings.

Life in Refugee Camps

In the camp I didn't suffer as much as others because I worked as a translator for the Thai military. I spoke French and a little English. I met a friend there and I helped my friend's family too. Because I was a translator, I knew all the big people. I asked the captain of the camp to bring water to my friend's mother because people had to wait in lines for water, morning and evening. The captain got the water for her. People like me because I share what I have. After two days, I met my mom in the old people's section of the camp. I was so happy, but my mom had to sleep with other old people, near the toilets. It smelled so bad that my mom had to cover her nose. It was like a jail. My mom did not want to stay there and she went back to Cambodia.

Every morning my friend worked in the Thai military office as a cook. I got a job too. Then I met my sisters who had left Cambodia one or two months before I did. They were in the orphans' section. When I found them we just hung onto each other and cried. Then all of us, my friend, my sisters, and I, worked in the kitchen, washing glasses and helping the cook.

In the camp I didn't know where to go. One sister went to France and sponsored us, but her application was

not approved. Then France went from being capitalist to socialist. I was afraid France would become communist, and my sister wrote the same thing. She said if we had a choice, to go to Australia, Canada, or America. They are big countries in the world, so there is more space and freedom. I had studied about America in school for geography lesson, and my stepbrother had already come here. I wrote a letter to him through Red Cross. But he had moved from Ohio to California and I had his address only in Ohio.

In the camp, my friend's family got sponsored by her brother. My friend suggested saying her mother was my aunt. So when people came from the Thai refugee office I went to ask if me and my sisters could go with my friend. They said yes. We came to Los Angeles.

Arrival in America

My friend's brother did not know we were also coming with his family. He expected nine people, so he got an apartment for nine people. But with us, twelve people came. We thought we will be kicked out of the apartment because there were too many people. So every time somebody knocked on the apartment door, my friend's nieces and nephews had to hide.

When we came the apartment had no lights or stove.

So our friend took us to his friend's house to eat for three days. That friend's wife was so good. We had to crowd into one car, so the first night my friend and I said we will walk home after dinner. But we got lost. We remembered the address, and I said to a man "Sir, I am Cambodian, but now I am lost." He gave us directions, but we walked all the way downtown. We asked a janitor who was cleaning the street, and he told us to get a cab. Then an old man with a van took us home for no charge. Next day he came with Campbell soup, fruit, and things, but we couldn't eat the soup because we were not used to it. Next day he brought boxes with blankets and clothes from his church. We were so happy. The man was about 67 years old. He told me he wanted to be my adopted father. He took me downtown and bought me a school bag for books. He introduced me as his adopted daughter or refugee kid. But I was embarrassed, because I thought people would think I was his wife.

When I first came to America everything was a complete shock. The mail box looked like a garbage can. I had to learn English, and read instructions very slowly. In Cambodia, we don't stand in line. People just push with their elbows, so the man usually wins. I was standing in wrong lines in post office, in welfare office. Sometimes I didn't even know there was a line. I remember a woman

said, "I was here first, madam," but the way she said it made me feel bad. To avoid the problem, I just stood behind. In the beginning, I did not realize you had to read signs for everything, like 'DO NOT ENTER'. I would just go in, and people got upset. At first I mixed up words like Emergency, Urgency, Agency, etc.

When I first came to this country a Vietnamese man in the welfare office was mean to people. He screamed at people. I was very new. Very nervous. But my sister-in-law was not new. She said, "Ghosts only scare people who are scared of them. They can't scare those who are not scared of them," and she went and shouted at the man also, and he was all right. Now I don't mind. But then, I was very new, very frightened, and frustrated.

Sometimes I did a lot of things wrong because I didn't know. In Cambodia we used the spoon we eat with to pick up more food. When I first started to work, a colleague had a birthday party. So I used my own fork to get another piece of cake. And my boss shouted at me "Hey, you are not supposed to do that." I was so embarrassed. In our country, we don't have a main spoon to serve. But the people here mind. Now I think they are right, because of germs. But she should have told me in private, not like the way she did, in front of everybody. Now when I eat with my own people, I want to tell them to get a serving

spoon. But I don't think it is right to tell them. We always ate that way.

When I first arrived, me and my sisters got about \$400.00 plus some food stamps every month. I asked the resettlement agency guy "What's the minimum wage I can make?" He said about \$3.50. Then he said, "You want to work here? I can pay you about \$4.50." I asked, "How do I start to work?" He said, "First get a driver's license with a friend, then you don't have to pay for driving lessons." I went to adult school and registered for English classes. There was a Japanese man there. He had a beautiful Honda. He taught me to drive one hour a day for one week. I failed the driving test two times, but I passed the third time. Then I went back to the resettlement agency and said, "Now I have a license. I can work." So they were ready to give me a job. But my half brother-in-law and my sister-in-law visited me at Christmas time. When they found out I had a high education they brought me to this city because there are more schools and funds. My sister-in-law said, "You already have some knowledge. But if you go to school you can improve the knowledge and it is better than money."

But I still wanted a job. I wanted to know what it feels like to work in this country. So my husband (he was not my husband then) took me to an office, and I applied as

an office clerk and they took me. That office was a place where they helped people. I worked five and a half years part-time and went to school full-time. But my boss there used to intimidate me. She would tell me that if I didn't do good work I will be fired. One day I was sick, but she did not let me go home and I collapsed. After that I did not want to work there. I did not want to see her. I was always tearful. I went to a psychologist and she helped a lot. She told me not to avoid the boss. That the sooner I go, the quicker I will get over this. She also told me how to talk to people, and my rights. So I went back. My boss tried to be nice. But I could not respect her because of the way she had treated me before.

My husband, he is a kind person, but he was so upset about what happened to me. He wanted to sue my boss. He thought she was mean to us and he wanted to show that Cambodians or Asians were not dumb, not stupid. He wanted to show that we live in this country with different cultures and customs, but we know some law, that we are persons too. But I thought if we sued them, the office will lose money, not her. And my office helped me all these years and helped other people. So I did not sue. But soon after that I left that job because I did not want to see her anymore.

I finished school and graduated in computer science,

but I couldn't get a job. At that time business was really down. Everyday I looked for an entry level job in the newspaper. But at interviews I found people with higher qualifications had come, and I felt very frustrated looking for a job. So I got this job. (Bopha does not work in the computer industry.)

I still go to school for my job, but it is hard for me. It's hard for me because I don't know the English terms. They are all new words for me. I study till my eyes come out, I expect I will get a good grade, but I only get high 'C'. In the class I took last time, the teacher talked about retirement; when people retire, the adjustments they have to make. My ideas about adjustment to retirement are wrong because my culture is different. I don't like my job. I would like to open a business, a shop to send gifts to other countries. My husband wants to open a grocery store. But we don't have money or someone to guide us from the beginning. We have a lot of friends, but no place and no money. So unless we have a lot of money we can't start a business.

Love and Marriage

I had a boyfriend in Cambodia. He was six years older than me. My boyfriend was very good. He loved me very much, but he did not say so in words. He would do things to show me he loved me, like getting everything I

needed for my next class ready, and he would teach me. So I became good in studies. When Pol Pot came my boyfriend had planned to burn a warehouse with other students. But one person in the group had told the Pol Pot leader, and all the students were killed. I heard about it from a friend. I feel my boyfriend still follows me. I feel he comes to me in my dreams. It disturbs me. I wish I could see him alive, not to live with him, but as a friend. He helped me a lot.

I met my husband in this country. He is also from Cambodia. I am happy with my family. It's not perfect, but it's okay. Marriage helped me a lot in recovering from my past. It does not give me everything, but gives me something. My husband is the same age as me, but he is wise. He thinks of long range things. He thinks about the family, not about things like gambling, smoking, or womanizing. But he finds it difficult to show affection like in American culture. Having my daughter really helps. She tells him to kiss her and me. Sometimes he does, sometimes he doesn't. He always thinks about how to be rich. We are OK. We are not poor, we survive. Like the proverb, we work hard. My husband tries to do two jobs to bring happiness to his family. The only thing I don't like is his high temper.

Reflections, Perceptions, Adjustments

I think Cambodia fell because the Khmer Rouge were brainwashed by China. Also, there was much corruption in the country. Lon Nol was good in Sihanouk's time, but when he became president, he only listened to corrupt people. He didn't go to see what people did. When people sit on fat chairs (gain power), they see only money; not problems with poor people. Over here, you have welfare, community lawyer, government hospital. In Cambodia, money must be there for lawyers, illnesses. If a person is sick in Cambodia, unless relatives help, he has no food. There was no public assistance. If one was poor one suffered. That's why the country broke; people had no heart, no mind, to fight. With the communists, the main point was helping the poor people. That was the rule, but it did not really happen. Khmer Rouge gave villagers more freedom at first and talked of how equality works. Poor people liked it until it was too late. They were not educated. They were farm people.

I won't forgive them (Khmer Rouge). I have something in my heart to revenge them, but not to the degree of killing. I feel so sorry about my family and my boyfriend. Every time the pictures in magazines and newspapers show refugees, I look to see if I can find my sister. At that time she was only five. She was too young to remember us.

Before I got married I used to feel so bad. I missed my boyfriend, my family, all my classmates, my house, neighbors. Right now I don't feel too bad because I have my husband and my child.

My child has more freedom in this country but it's easier to raise kids in our country. Most people have many kids, so kids take care of each other. Over here, everywhere you go, you have to take your kid. Even to leave my kid with my sister, I have to call her and make appointments. Here two people have to work in order to survive. So to leave my kid in day care I have to get up early, get her ready quickly, and then take her to school. Then I have to watch the time to pick her up. After work, I am tired. I have to study. But I still have to make good interesting food for my family. After I cook and eat my child wants to play. You have to, sometimes. In the beginning you have to spend a lot of time with children. It's like growing a tree. From beginning you must water a tree well for strong roots. Later, the tree does not need so much water. Children are just like that. They must have good roots. First, you have to help children to start from the bottom. Then when they can crawl, they learn to walk. Then they run.

In this country you can't discipline the kid. You can't switch your child. But children have to be

disciplined. I think I should have the right. I have to yell when I am angry. I have to let it out. But my kid, she asks me "Why do you have to yell? Then I can yell at you." She talks back and it is wrong. Kids need to learn to adjust too. I have four rules for my child.

1. When Mom and Dad talk on the phone or to someone, don't bother.
2. If she wants to buy something, go somewhere, eat something, she has to ask us.
3. Be nice and polite to people. She has to share her toys with other kids, and not say, "I hate you," or "You are not my friend." She has to respect old people, and say, "Hi Uncle, hi Aunty." When people come to our house, she has to ask them to sit down, and what they like to eat and drink. Even if she is mad at them, she must not show it. She must be nice to them. Talk to them. She must not be quiet.
4. When she goes to school, she needs to behave, and eat all her lunch.

I have two sisters here. The younger one lives with the older one. Last night they were here because they cannot get along. The older one feels the younger one is not doing her part. She does not answer when the older one calls her. So the older one scolded her, and the younger one came here. She has a car, so she can go anywhere she

wants to without telling the older one. The older one does not think that is right. She is like the mother now. If we were in our country, the younger one cannot do that.

I appreciate living here. There is no discrimination, at least publicly. I learned English fast because I had my French background. I learned other things fast because I had my background from living in the city and going to school. I was able to get a job that used my knowledge. I have freedom to do work without people abusing my nationality. I work hard and I earn money. I am happy with my family. But I feel lonely in this country. I need a best friend, but I don't know how to make a best friend. A good best friend is around your age, you can tell everything, slap each other on the arm, use each other for help. In this country I cannot find someone from my country to match my level. Even now American people who look at me, look at me as if I am different. I wrote to my mom and asked her to see if she can find a best friend I had in school that I can help. I wrote to my sister in Cambodia to give my name to any best friends, but they cannot find any of my classmates. Right now my sister and I send money to help a friend who is in refugee camp. She lives with her two sisters. They have no parents. They are Cambodian by blood and my friend used to give me a ride when I went to medical school. She took me on her

scooter. She is so unhappy in the camp that she once sent me a letter written with blood. She wanted to kill herself. She wants to become a prostitute so she can earn money. I feel so upset when she writes that.

Before I came to America, I lived in Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand. Out of Thai, Vietnamese and Cambodians, Cambodians are the most honest. They are timid. The Vietnamese are not very honest. They are more selfish, smarter, ambitious. They do something only if they get something for themselves. The Thai are in between. In this country too, Cambodians only want to live a good life. They are not bothered about getting rich. They live among themselves, and do things other Cambodians do. But sometimes I feel shy about some of the things they do. They walk around in sarongs, going to shops and other places. We don't wear sarongs to go out, they are like pajamas. I feel embarrassed when I see them in shops because I am also Cambodian. My mother always told us to dress well because people always tell who you are by your dress. For example, a child steals a candy bar. But if the child and mother are dressed well, it might not look like stealing. But when I have a problem with my people I don't say anything directly. I have to make up a story. Like when I see them in sarong, I say, "Oh, you were rushing, you had no time to change clothes?" The adults

don't learn English. They won't phone for doctor's appointments because someone might speak English. I tell them if they don't learn English, they can't support themselves when their children leave. I ask them "If you don't help yourself, who will help you?" I think they understand what I tell them, but I don't know if they accept and follow. But we must not judge them. Vietnam became communist, but that country did not suffer like Cambodia. Our people suffered too much to forget.

When I went back to Cambodia after the liberation, I missed it a lot. But I never planned to live there. If the country was not taken over by Khmer Rouge I prefer to have lived there. It is easy to live in a small country. You get used to the culture, society, food. But I underwent a lot of trauma in communism and now I like living here. Living in this country is difficult because you need a lot of money. You have to work hard to get what you want. But I don't think money is the most important thing. Money makes people crazy. You do all kinds of things you are not supposed to do to get money. Even my sister-in-law said, "When you want to get married, don't care about money. If the man has high education and understanding, you know you can be happy." I am still Buddhist, but my friend is a Christian now. I was exposed to that when I first came here. Every Sunday morning the

church people came to take us and the family that came with us to church in a van. I had to go to please them. They helped us. But I still have to pray to my God, the Buddha. So when they came, I had to put away the Buddha in my room. I also pray to my father; I feel he helps me. I believe all religions make people good. But what part of Christianity do you believe? If you do something wrong, you confess, and it is over. In Buddhism sin can't be subtracted and become zero. But in Christianity you do bad thing, you tell God, and it is over. I don't think it is fair. But I like my friend. I don't want to hurt her. She invites me to her Church party, and I go. I enjoy it. They pass a paper with questions: Do you want to join church? I say I will join later. I don't say no because I don't want to hurt them.

We lived in Cambodia under discrimination and prejudice. Without money, we couldn't have a place in society. In this country, we have more freedom. Even if you don't know the language, people help you. I like this country. We have now become American citizens. I will go back to Cambodia to visit, but not to live.

PART IV
INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER 11

AMERICAN VIEWS OF CAMBODIAN REFUGEE ADJUSTMENTS

The Refugee Act of 1980 sets as the primary goal of the Federal resettlement program the "achievement of self-sufficiency as quickly as possible" for refugees admitted to the United States. Since the passage of this Act, the vast majority of refugees who have come here are Southeast Asians. Rumbaut and Ima observe that in order to achieve the 'self-sufficiency' goal of the Act, the focus of refugee resettlement programs has been on the placement of adult refugees in regular employment (Rumbaut and Ima 1988, 2). David Haines, writing on refugees' adjustments says,

The precise way in which refugees adjust to the US varies as would be expected, simply from the divergent social and cultural heritages that they bring with them. . . . The answer requires separate attention to the capabilities, expectations, and values refugees bring with them, the way in which they come to the US, the kind of reception they receive, and the kinds of problems they are likely to encounter (Haines 1985, 17).

The six narrators in this study came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, which gave them different capabilities and expectations. But as part of the larger Cambodian society, they share a common worldview, common social and cultural ideals, the Pol Pot experience, and

now, an existence as refugees here. How do Americans view the success or failure of Khmer refugee adjustment to the United States?

In one of my interviews, an official of a Refugee Resettlement Agency observed,

When compared with other refugee groups both from Southeast Asia and from countries such as Iran and Ethiopia, many Cambodians in Santa Clara County have not mainstreamed successfully. They have not found jobs, not become citizens, and not learned English.

Rumbaut and Ima, authors of the 1988 SARYS Report (Southeast Asian Refugee Youth Study) observe that while the Vietnamese, who have been here the longest, have been successful in establishing economic 'self-sufficiency', the Khmer have yet to match the same level of self-sufficiency. They also believe that in the near future, strategies for economic self-sufficiency in Southeast Asian refugee communities will rest significantly with the generation born in Asia, but educated in America.

These observers believe that the Khmer refugees have been less successful than other refugee groups in mainstreaming with the larger society and in achieving self-sufficiency, the first and most important step towards successful social adjustment.

The refugee resettlement agency official I interviewed says that psychological studies have shown that the type of traumatic experiences suffered by Khmer

refugees under Pol Pot can prevent victims from having hopes about the future, and tend to leave many refugees with a sense of hopelessness and defeat. This official believes this hopelessness is intensified because families have been separated; many relatives are in refugee camps, or at the Cambodia-Thai border. She sees family reunification as a solution to this problem. She also claims that the destruction of their country and way of life caused many refugees to have no sense of belonging here or anywhere else; this prevents them from long range planning. Instead they live just for the moment. To overcome this feeling of absence of continuity and belonging, the official considers it important that the refugees maintain their language, dance, and music from generation to generation.

Since the Khmer Rouge killed most of the westernized, educated, professional elite, the vast majority of Khmer refugees here are from rural backgrounds with little westernization and western-style education. The agency official sees the rural background of the refugees and their lack of westernization as two key factors for the non-mainstreaming of refugees. The official cited the example of a Hmong teen-ager who switched off TV immediately when a shooting scene came on the screen because he feared he would be shot if the gun was pointed

at him. The official feels such fears show that some TV scenes are too real for these refugees since they have had no previous exposure to western technical advances.

The official cited many elements that she considers hamper the progress of Khmer refugees in adjusting to this country. The fast pace of both life style and speech habits here, she felt, must seem quite confusing to refugees from a peasant background who came from a country where "both the heat and the culture slowed them down." Diversities in ethnic groups, languages, and modes of dress here were also seen as contributing factors, in addition to the saturation of drugs and rock music, and explicit expression of love as opposed to the arranged marriages in Cambodia. Unfamiliar concepts such as insurance, choices in the supermarket instead of the usual bartering with neighbors, and procedures such as going to court for obtaining custody of family members, were other factors seen as presenting difficulties to the refugees. Indeed, the official felt that it comes as a tremendous surprise to these refugees that in this land of freedom everything is regulated by law.

The official further felt the refugees' lack of education gave them a certain sense of defeat. For example, a Khmer refugee heard that his two orphaned brothers had reached a refugee camp and wished to sponsor

them to come to America. Although he had been here for seven years and was employed, he had not become an American citizen; this prevented him from sponsoring his brothers. He told this official that he had not obtained citizenship because as a former peasant, he did not feel he was worthy enough to be a citizen. She advised him to obtain citizenship, and though he agreed to, she does not believe he would. The official feels that unlike those from peasant backgrounds, the few educated refugees who survived the Khmer Rouge regime and came here, are employed, have adjusted well, obtained citizenship, and "really stand out."

This official states that the poor neighborhoods where the majority of Khmer refugees live also interfere with their progress. She notes that in this environment the refugees are "shoulder to shoulder with other poor minorities, and those on the next level up resent those at the bottom, because they might advance more." She observed that Khmer refugees have problems with Hispanic and Black populations, but that instead of resolving these problems with the help of the police, they move away. She hoped that liaison work done by Khmer community workers between the police and the community would enhance the awareness and understanding of each other and eliminate such problems.

The official does not feel that the Buddhist beliefs of the Khmer affect their adjustments and achievement of self-sufficiency, for the Vietnamese, who are also Buddhist, have mainstreamed very successfully. However, the official noted that peasant and tribal groups listen to their leaders, and Cambodians want to stay with their group, in contrast to the Vietnamese who are much more individualistic and westernized. She expressed the hope that the monks, who are highly respected, would advise the people to achieve success by learning English and finding jobs.

The official noted that Cambodians are good workers who are liked by employers, and that there are many entry level jobs in the assembly lines in the electronics industry which require no verbal skills. She believes that some refugees are unemployed because they choose to be, that they have acquired the 'welfare mentality', and use ailments such as headaches as reasons for not finding employment. Though the official believes depression is a reality for these refugees, she also feels it could be overcome by finding work and learning English. She further believes employment would help to get rid of the defeatist attitudes and wasted lives, and to demonstrate that lives can be rebuilt.

Other observers too have expressed the opinion that

some Khmer refugees are neither trying to adjust nor making the effort to learn English as they should. When I pointed out that some refugees do attend English as a Second Language classes every evening, and still had not progressed satisfactorily in language acquisition, one person speculated, "they probably go there for socializing with friends." Some, including Pu Ma's doctor, feel that the refugees' preoccupation with memories of the Khmer Rouge era hamper their adjustment. Pu Ma's doctor has advised her not to think about her husband and mother who were murdered by the Khmer Rouge, and to get on with life here.

In the SARYS Study, Rumbaut and Ima also mention that the rural backgrounds of the vast majority of post 1975 Indochinese refugees make them less likely to be literate, know English, or bring occupational skills transferable to the American job market. They further note that these refugees suffered more traumatic migrational experiences than those who escaped earlier, and that their arrival in the United States during more difficult economic times exacerbated difficulties of their social and psychological adjustment. In addition to these problems common to thousands of post-1975 refugees from all three Southeast Asian countries, Rumbaut and Ima list other key factors affecting the adjustment of Khmer refugees, who have

Indian, rather than Chinese cultural and linguistic roots.

The authors observe that unlike Vietnamese households, Khmer households generally have individualistic versus collective strategies of adjustment. For instance, households tend to have separate budgets for nuclear families, rather than pooled-income strategies. The reasons for this, the authors feel, are first, that Khmer family organization tends to be "more nuclear, neo-local, bilateral, and female-centered," and second, that extended families tend to "reflect optional and individualistic rather than obligatory or deeply institutionalized commitments" unlike the Vietnamese family organization built upon Confucian models. The Khmer are described as having "a looser sense of discipline and obligation that pervades all social life--not only outside the family, but within the family as well, including both parent/child and husband/wife relationships." They claim that individualistic feelings among the Khmer emphasize feelings of emotional fulfillment rather than commitment. The authors also believe that the Khmer have less filial piety norms and a weaker sense of obligation to parents, and no form of ancestor worship.

Rumbaut and Ima see among the Khmer, less parental discipline and influence on children than in other Southeast Asian refugee communities. They believe this

affects educational achievement and occupational mobility. They do note that Khmer parents may not be aware of occupational possibilities here. They say that unlike other Southeast Asian groups, social control of Khmer children is a family matter, rather than one of community concern and involvement. They observe, however, that this lack of parental control has not produced as high a rate of juvenile delinquency as among Laotian refugees.

The authors say the Khmer community is less organized than other Southeast Asian refugee communities. They have less aid available since they draw support from kinship lines that are loose and wide; their community is horizontal and peer oriented, rather than vertical and family oriented, like the Vietnamese. But they note that the Khmer talk about the concept of 'community' with a reverence akin to the reverence with which the Vietnamese talk of 'family,' and that for the Khmer, the community is a sacred and real entity which should not be violated. The authors speculate that this ideal is perhaps related to the Theravada Buddhist practice of establishing merit by doing good deeds for the village pagoda and that the Khmer conceive of the 'community' as a vessel into which good deeds are placed.

Regarding socio-cultural adjustment, Rumbaut and Ima have observed rapid changes in gender roles within all

ethnic groups studied, changes that may produce family conflicts, but may also elevate the 'heretofore subordinate status of women,' and thereby enhance their prospects for future economic self-sufficiency. They do note that Khmer women however, have more individual control over their lives than, for instance, Vietnamese women. These are sentiments that are given overt support by prevailing American values, as observed by the authors.

With regard to the Pol Pot holocaust, the authors point out that the structural and emotional devastation of Khmer families caused by that experience have resulted in a large number of widows. The study also notes that though in the pre-Pol Pot era households were 'loose', divorce and separations were rare. But here in the United States, Khmer marriages are breaking up because the Pol Pot trauma has rendered refugees incapable of loving, working, and caring. They further note that unlike in Cambodia, violation of sexual mores commonly takes place here, with some men taking advantage of lonely Khmer women.

The SARYS study notes that Khmer refugee households are headed by females with emotional depression levels higher than for any other group studied. The IHARP study (Indochinese Health and Adaptation Research Project) also conducted by Rumbaut and Ima, suggests that the depressive symptoms are chronic, and not merely transient moods or

affective disorders, and that these and other physical problems affect Khmer refugees' ability to parent. They see this as the more immediate barrier to Khmer social adjustment and children's educational achievement. They assert that the immediacy of poverty and depression has given education a low priority, and their research reveals that in the San Diego area, the Khmer have a 50 percent school dropout rate, the highest for any Southeast Asian refugee group. Although they speculate that dropping out might be a coping strategy of withdrawing to get away from a problem situation, Rumbaut and Ima see counseling and intervention in emotional issues as an immediate first priority over (or in tandem with) educational interventions. They add that the Khmer are less ethnocentric and nationalistic than other refugee groups, developing more affective relations with Americans than other refugee groups who are seen as more manipulative. This makes counseling easier and beneficial: the Khmer response promotes good feeling between refugees and authority figures because it leaves the latter with the sense of having 'engaged' a real human being. Though their expressiveness aids in their ability to gain from counseling and therapy, and their tolerance and openness to American culture makes them more likable, the study questions the openness, since other studies have shown that

ethnic resilience (retention of ethnic characteristics) is likely to be associated with academic success, while 'Americanization' is likely to undermine it.

The authors note several factors affecting refugee youths' unsuccessful adjustment to the school and to scholastic achievements:

1. Non-placement of refugees from lower social classes with less ability to speak English and to interact with Americans in mainstream courses other than math and science.
2. The lack of bilingual and bi-cultural professionals who may bridge the cultural gap between refugees and the larger American world.
3. Racial prejudices.
4. ESL lessons designed without consideration for differences between English and refugees' native languages, resulting in cognitive barriers for refugees.
5. Different teaching and learning styles. Regarding learning styles, the authors note that rote learning, as generally favored in refugees' countries of origin, do not encourage independent opinions and 'critical thinking', which limit the availability of jobs to refugees.

Rumbaut and Ima claim that Theravada Buddhist values

of the Khmer make them more passive and reactive, less pragmatic, more fatalistic, and more oriented to recreational values than to an ethic of personal effort and hard work. They see the Buddhist karmic theory as contributing to a lack of competitive aggressiveness, especially with regard to education and work. The authors note, however, that the refugees they observed were rural with lower class resources and socio-cultural elements that are less likely to produce 'success' in a competitive American context, and that it is only the educated elite with French urban middle class backgrounds who search for educational success.

The SARYS study concludes that the Khmer consider providing service to others as a reason for a career, and tend to select 'low status' occupations entailing human services, such as nursing, clerical assistance, and electrical repair work. The authors say that even though this may be because the Khmer are not yet acquainted with 'high status' jobs because of lack of contacts in the fields, they find that for the Khmer, the need to serve others seems to be a central source of life satisfaction, which the authors say probably reflects the Buddhist concept of doing good deeds to earn merit for future lives. They see the Khmer as typically non-aggressive, unhurried, unambitious, with a 'step by step' coping style. They are

self and peer oriented toward affective, non-competitive, short term goals. The authors speculate that these characteristics may be the results of parental values and possibly overprotective child rearing practices which do not encourage independence, or high standards of achievement by children, and the result of karmic theory based on Buddhist teachings. The authors believe that "the Khmer theory of achievement is based not so much on the idea of independent effort, hard work, and 'moral character', but rather on the notion that innate talent will bloom on its own, and that one needs only to be alerted to its presence."

In Adjustment Strategies of the Khmer Refugees in San Diego, California (hereafter referred to as the San Diego study), the authors observe that "Clearly they (Khmer refugees) are not migrants, but rather, they are refugees who are fleeing from death and misery and only secondarily are they migrating for a better life" (Ima et al 1983, 36). By "better life" Ima and others seem to refer to economic gain.

As implied in the 1980 Refugee Act, successful social adjustment of refugees can be achieved only through economic self-sufficiency. In the opinion of researchers and service providers, the way to attain this objective is through aggressive, competitive interactions and

educational achievements that lead to 'high status' occupations which will ensure economic rewards. The issue which they have overlooked is the extent to which American views of refugee adjustments match those of Cambodian refugees who are expected to meet these goals.

CHAPTER 12

CAMBODIAN VIEWS OF ADJUSTMENTS

The narratives in this study demonstrate that Khmer refugees did not come to America after deliberate planning, or even by choice. By preference, they would have gone to France, simply because that was the western country they were familiar with. When their applications to resettle in France failed, some refugees came here because this country was non-communist, or because it was big, and therefore had more space for outsiders. Many were sponsored by other relatives who were already here, which generally decided the issue for them. Some like Pu Ma and Look Tha, came with the belief that they will return to Cambodia after that country became politically free. It is also clear that the refugees were not aware of any economic opportunities, or other socio-cultural factors about America prior to their arrival here.

Authors of the San Diego study and the refugee resettlement agency official note that the Khmer are more preoccupied with the experience of war and missing relatives than other refugees, and that the consequences of this shock might, in part, account for their slower

adjustment to the United States than other Indochinese refugees. Others believe that the refugees could overcome the war and holocaust memories and adjust to living here, if only they would learn English and find jobs.

As shown in the narratives, the refugees themselves recognize that keeping the mind and body productively occupied benefits their emotional well-being. But during the course of my work, there were times when my subjects who seemed well adjusted to America one day, were mentally in Cambodia on another day. They would sit and stare, usually at the ground, without saying anything. Often their faces would be blank, but sometimes an expression or tears would betray their pain. How and why does the Pol Pot experience affect the refugees who are now here, far from the hell they were in?

Even refugees like Nya Srey, who have learned English and found jobs, continue to be plagued by nightmares caused by events such as thunderstorms which evoke memories of bombardments of their country. Nya Srey, for example, is incapable of going to work after a particularly bad night. Pu Ma's parenting capabilities are impaired when she dreams of Pol Pot, a situation consistent with the San Diego findings. Almost always refugees return to Cambodia in their dreams, which they find even more distressing. Look Tha's "head feels very tight and his chest feels sick" when

he reflects on the Pol Pot holocaust.

Even if the refugees could somehow stop reflecting on what happened, the nightmares are simply beyond their control. Moreover, functions such as eating, helping a friend, and deciding on children's education or choice of employment, which should all be normal experiences, are intertwined with the Pol Pot experience for these refugees. Nya Srey stopped her son from choosing a career in legal studies here in America, because she felt her husband was killed only because he was a lawyer. Like many other Khmer refugee women, both here and in San Diego, she is desperately lonely and wishes to find a husband, but the problems she faces are completely the consequences of Pol Pot's actions. She does not meet many men who are compatible with her western educated, middle-class upbringing, since most were killed by the regime. She also feels that if she married another Cambodian or Asian man, she will betray her dead husband whom she loved, and who gave her the only happiness she ever knew. She feels inadequate about her English language skills and western social skills to find companionship among American men, but she feels that is what she must do. Nya Srey feels angry with herself because of her inadequacies; a feeling expressed by many women from peasant backgrounds too. She has so much anger with the Khmer Rouge "who killed their

own people" that she does not want to be Cambodian anymore. She has cut herself off from the community almost completely, which adds to her loneliness. Nor does she feel she can be 'American' because she feels she is culturally completely different. Nya Srey expresses the hopelessness felt by many when she says, "I just feel bad, sick, and tired, and it's not great to feel like that" (p. 166).

Though Bopha has no desire to kill another person, she wishes to take revenge on the Khmer Rouge soldier who killed her five-year-old sister. Though she has been told her sister was killed, she still harbors a faint hope that her sister might be alive, and scans every picture of refugees, hoping to find her. Bopha is now married and has a daughter. This has helped in her adjustment, but she yearns for a 'best friend' with whom she can share her joys, fears, and sorrows. She feels she is considered an 'outsider' here.

Bopha and her sister financially help three Cambodian sisters who are in refugee camps where "brutality escalates hopelessness, suicide, child abuse; attitudes and behaviors of a tragic kind has become the norm" (Kitty Dukakis 1988 Congressional Hearings on Cambodia). The women's life of imprisonment in the refugee camp is so desperate because they see no other future; the oldest girl

contemplates prostitution to earn some pocket money. When she is overcome by utter hopelessness she considers suicide. Bopha once received a letter written in blood--the despair and the hopelessness of the oldest sister had been too overwhelming. When she hears and sees such misery, Bopha becomes deeply disturbed. Thus, the hopelessness of relatives and friends imprisoned in refugee camps continues the Pol Pot trauma for refugees though they are now thousands of miles away, in a free country.

Pu Ma says when she eats good food in this country, she is reminded of her husband and mother who died of starvation. In pre-revolutionary Cambodia, the highest respect for life was professed. Food was generously shared with each other because that is what sustained life. But during the holocaust, the well-fed Khmer Rouge soldiers deliberately starved Pu Ma's husband and scores of others in the sanctity of Buddhist temples, where previously, compassion and generosity had no bounds. Moreover, the survivors could not help the sick, starved, abused, and dying parents, spouses, children, siblings, relatives, and friends, as they had been required to do both morally and legally before the revolution. These memories still plague them even though they could not have done anything to help.

Mum's bright academic future ended tragically both in Cambodia and here, as a consequence of Pol Pot's

autogenocidal holocaust. Her marriage at seventeen ended in divorce. Although her ambition is to be a lawyer, and she is obviously bright enough to achieve it, her tragic experiences make her question her emotional stability to do well in school. For this reason, she has not returned to school.

Koun Srey, who was only six when she arrived here as a refugee, has so much anger at the Khmer Rouge she contemplates killing the soldier who killed her father. This is probably due to her mother's suffering as a result of the Cambodian holocaust. At sixteen, Koun Srey worries about her brain because she has problems with learning English. She lives in one of the poorest neighborhoods in town, and is confined to her house when she is not in school. She sees no future in this country because she cannot get a decent job without English. She would like to go back to her country, but as long as the Pol Pot threat continues, her hope cannot be fulfilled.

Most refugees feel homesick, but they do not want to return to Cambodia while the current Vietnamese communist regime is there. The Vietnamese presence in Cambodia is again a consequence of the Khmer Rouge actions. As the narratives show, apart from the fighting between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese, the dislike and distrust the Khmer have for the Vietnamese due to historical aggression

and 'colonization' run very deep. At the Congressional Hearings on the future of Cambodia in June 1988, Haing Ngor observed,

We Cambodians just need our homeland back. We want peace and freedom, Cambodian style. Not Russian, Vietnamese, Chinese style. . . . The Vietnamese kill our people, our culture. But they can't kill the Cambodian spirit.

Even here, the Khmer feel they cannot be close friends with Vietnamese refugees because they cannot trust them.

Since Buddhists believe that the reincarnation of a person is largely determined by the purity of the dying person's mind, no one wanted to die under Pol Pot. As Look Tha explains, due to fear and hatred, they did not have the right state of mind to die. Thus death is as important as life in Buddhist philosophy, and as Ngor and Yathay write, for the Khmer, it was the respect for the living and the dead that made people civilized and human (chapter four). These values were such a fundamental part of their culture that proper funeral ceremonies were even required by law. But many of the survivors were not allowed to hold even the most meager of traditional funeral services for those who were killed. They therefore could not transfer merit, according to the Buddhist practices, to their loved ones who died, and so could not help them to have better lives in the future (chapter four). Pu Ma and Nya Srey did not

see their husbands die, or their corpses. In fact, one reason for Nya Srey's survival was her belief that she would eventually meet him, but it was not to be.

Pu Ma starts her narrative with an incident regarding her mother's dead husband, which illustrates her fear and belief in the reality of kmait (ghosts of people who were murdered). Her fear that her murdered husband for whom she could not hold funeral services might not be reborn, may implicitly mean that she fears he may now be a kmait. If so, the fact that his soul is not at peace will be greatly disturbing to Pu Ma, and will hamper her adjustments to this country. Haing Ngor, a doctor trained in western medical practices writes about his people who died in the holocaust,

Someday, when Cambodia is free, I will return to the leaning sdao tree on the hillock in the rice fields. With me will be Buddhist monks. We will hold a ceremony and build a monument for her next to the temple on the mountainside. We will pray for Houy and her mother and my parents and family, and for all those who lost their lives. Then maybe their souls will be at peace. And maybe mine will be too (Ngor 1987, 466).

Therefore, the Pol Pot experience for these refugees are not just past experiences of starvation, extended physical hardships, war memories and missing relatives, but the desecration of their whole society, their whole being; emotional, physical, social, and cultural. Although they are now in the United States, thousands of miles away from Cambodia, their very presence here is a consequence of that

experience. It will always be a part of their lives. Even if they control the thoughts and actions that bring back the horror of all that happened, can they ever forget? How do they try to cope?

Although it seems on the surface that Buddhist teachings about reincarnation contribute to the refugees' emotional problems, Look Tha and Nya Srey say the Buddhist karmic theory and meditation techniques helped them to not lose their minds (see chapter 4). The karmic belief further stopped both of them from committing wrongful or revengeful actions, which definitely helped to save their own and their families' lives. It also prevented any remorse that would have been the consequence of such actions. Although this 'inaction' may seem like passive resistance to outside observers, a Theravada Buddhist monk who counsels Khmer refugees pointed out that what may seem like passive acceptance of fate is the result of being much more aggressive with oneself; one has to consciously control one's thoughts and actions, when it would be much easier to act on impulse.

Buddhism also aids the refugees tremendously in dealing with their grief by enabling them to transfer merit to their dead relatives. Merit is acquired especially by giving alms to monks who are held in the highest respect as exemplars of Buddhist teachings, and guides in secular

living and spiritual needs. The alms are given in the memory of the dead and merit transferred to them at events such as Pchum Ben, a ceremony held annually to appease the spirits of dead ancestors, as documented by Ebihara and as described by Look Tha. This ability to help their dead relatives, friends, and countrymen to have better lives in the future help the refugees emotionally, since it gives them hope and the ability to lessen the guilt for having survived.

However much Khmer refugees may rationalize or try to gain peace of mind through spiritual processes, the horror of the Pol Pot experience has been so devastating that refugee mental health studies conducted in Santa Clara County and in San Diego, (the Meinhardt Study and the IHARP Study respectively) indicate that Khmer refugees suffer from emotional depression levels higher than for any other refugee group studied. Although most mental health workers are beginning to relate the refugees' physical ailments to their emotional health (or ill health), others, like Pu Ma's doctor, do not seem to have paid attention to these problems. But as shown, the Khmer Rouge trauma affects their normal daily functions which of course now includes coping with a new culture, language, worldview and society, as refugees in America.

It has been noted by various observers and

researchers that the vast majority of the Khmer refugees came from 'pre-modern, rural, agrarian, non-western backgrounds,' with little preparation for resettlement in a technologically advanced, competitive society such as the United States. Although traditional Cambodian education prepared the people for a useful life in the village, it gave them neither a global perspective nor a system of learning in the western sense. Moreover, many refugees came with minimal literacy in Khmer and no foreign language skills, and some were illiterate. In Cambodia the refugees lived among their own people in a cooperative society. On their arrival here, almost all the refugees were housed in socially, culturally, and economically depressed urban areas among other low-income minority groups. As Pu Ma and Koun Srey show in their narratives, the Khmer in her neighborhood are intimidated and harassed by Black and Hispanic groups. After having lost so many of their loved ones to violent actions, the Khmer are even more insecure and worried about the safety of their families. Even potential natural disasters such as earthquakes cause tremendous anxiety for them. This was apparent when hundreds of Khmer refugees moved from southern California to the central valley in northern California after the Whittier earthquake in October 1987 (San Jose Mercury News, May 20, 1988).

Khmer refugees I have come to know are also intimidated and exploited by solicitors asking for money for various causes, sales persons selling items from saucepans to books, and missionaries from various churches who not only try to force the adults to come to church, but also forcibly take refugee children to church. This not only violates the refugees' constitutional right to practice their religion, it also deprives them of their means of healing the wounds inflicted by the Pol Pot holocaust, with obvious implications for their adjustment and mental health. Although the narrators pretend to accommodate these missionaries since it is against their social ethics to be inhospitable to visitors, these forced indoctrinations provoke expressions of frustration and anger, as seen in Mum's narrative.

Refugees like Nya Srey and Bopha acquired English language skills more easily due to their previous high educational experience. This enabled them to find employment, become economically self-sufficient, and move to better neighborhoods, which undoubtedly helped in their adjustment. But the vast majority of others, like Pu Ma who is on welfare, are confined to the poorest of neighborhoods; they are afraid of the environment which has 'bad men'. As the refugee resettlement agency official observes, many Khmer refugees have not learned English,

which severely limits their opportunities for getting jobs and improving their living conditions. Although Pu Ma has attended ESL classes for two years, she has not managed to learn even the basic language skills, as shown in the sample of her original narrative. Why have Khmer refugees not learned English? Is it the lack of prior educational experience and modernity? Or is it because they don't want to, since they have the 'welfare mentality' and are reluctant to work? Or are there other reasons? Rumbaut and Ima list several factors affecting refugee youths' unsuccessful scholastic achievements (Chapter 11), all of which are experienced by the subjects of this study too. My research further revealed several other important factors affecting Khmer refugees' English language acquisition.

As a result of my teaching English to refugees in their own homes, I was able to observe the refugees' life style, their needs and problems, their cultural values and their methods of communication in a manner that a teacher in a classroom is unable to do. My observations gave me valuable insight into Khmer refugee's language learning problems. It soon became apparent that the main reason for the refugees' lack of success in ESL acquisition was not a lack of interest or inability on their part, but the inappropriateness of the ESL lessons themselves, which do not address their needs as refugees. For instance, as

observed by Ebihara and the official of the Refugee Resettlement Agency, widespread use of money, banking systems, or credit cards, were not part of village or urban life. Look Tha says that even in urban areas, only businessmen or 'big people' (the very rich) used banks. As refugees here, many now depend on welfare assistance, and do not have savings to deposit in banks. But ESL lessons are often about matters such as banking, which reflect the practical needs of middle class people, not of refugees on welfare. Since banking is not a part of their daily experiences, lessons about the subject have no application or meaning to the refugees, and so do not provide stimulation for learning or retention. Although current ESL pedagogy and methodology recognize the importance of assessing students' needs, the ESL lessons I observed being taught to my subjects appeared to address American, rather than Cambodian needs for survival.

Cambodian needs for survival include: learning to deal with apartment managers, police officers, and personnel in institutions such as hospitals, schools, and housing and welfare departments; learning to overcome the fear of using the telephone; and learning more assertive communication methods. To be effective and successful, these needs must be met with language lessons developed with consideration for Khmer cultural values. For example,

I witnessed an encounter between Nya Srey and an unsolicited insurance agent who appeared at her door. Nya Srey is more westernized and has better English speaking skills than most other Khmer refugees. However, when confronted by the insurance agent who requested information about her personal background, she did not know how to respond. She did not want to volunteer personal information, and she clearly did not want to divulge the fact that she was a widow. Ultimately, she solved the problem by asking the man to come later when her son was at home. After he left, I told Nya Srey that she does not have to entertain or reveal information to any outsiders, and that she has the right to ask them to leave. But from her facial expression it was apparent that I had embarrassed her; the Khmer value hospitality, and would not ask a guest to leave. I then told her that if she felt uncomfortable about asking unsolicited salespeople to leave, she can ask for their business cards and let them know she will call them if she needed their services. That was an appropriate suggestion; it provided a solution without violating Nya Srey's cultural values.

The above problem of inappropriate language lessons is made worse by the refugees' learning methods. In Cambodia students learned by rote, and today too Khmer refugees try to commit to memory the ESL lessons they

learn. But they do not always understand what they try to memorize, and many refugees believe their lack of understanding of English is because their memories are impaired by the trauma inflicted on them by the Khmer Rouge. Therefore, it is necessary to develop not only useful lessons addressing their needs, but also techniques to show the refugees that they can remember what they learn. Such an approach will improve their self-esteem and enhance their learning.

Some teachers note that speakers of many different languages can learn English, and do not consider structural features of particular languages as important factors impeding the learning of English. Others disagree. Ebihara observes that the many differences between Khmer and English are such that there is no easy transfer from one language to the other. My own experience with Khmer language learning confirms her observation. Nya Srey and Bopha themselves recognize that their familiarity with the French language helped them a great deal in acquiring English language skills. All the narratives, and especially Pu Ma's give good insights to the types of cognitive problems the refugees encounter in learning English. I have further been told by refugees attending ESL classes that the speed with which the lessons are taught is just too much for them. Look Tha, who is more

conversant in English than many other refugees, finds it difficult to follow even the newscasters on TV because of their fast speech; a fact also noted by the refugee resettlement agency official.

In addition to the above problems, some Khmer refugees find it painful to sit in one place for too long, due to physical injury resulting from beatings and other abuse. Many suffer from digestive disorders caused by starvation. When they see students sitting together, some men are reminded of the Khmer Rouge indoctrination sessions; this upsets them so much they must leave the room. Thus, the holocaust and the excessive mental and physical torture inflicted on the people by the Khmer Rouge cause problems for Khmer refugees which affect their language learning in a manner that is not common to all Southeast Asian Refugees.

The San Diego study says that refugee adjustment must be viewed in terms of modernity in addition to a move between different countries. With this in mind the authors use education and orientation towards education as keys towards predicting success in adjustment. How do American views of education match those of Cambodians?

As indicated by Look Tha and Bopha, schools were institutions where academic subjects as well as social ideals, such as obedience and respect for elders, parents,

and teachers, were taught. Koun Srey observes, "The old people know a lot of things because they were born a long time ago" (p. 248). Look Tha points out that while children in the United States are taught about their freedom and rights, in Cambodia children were taught to respect and obey their parents and elders. Pu Ma, whose formal education came to an end after a couple of years, had social values instilled in her at home.

The narratives show that in Khmer society parents and children have definite roles and duties to fulfill. These are also a part of the religious teachings. The freedom of action that children have here is perceived by the refugees as lack of caring on the part of both the parent and child for each other, and as loss of parental authority. This view is held both by twenty-two-year-old Mum who came from an urban background, and by sixteen-year-old Koun Srey, who came from a rural background. Both arrived as young children and grew up here. Mum says,

I respect Americans, but I am ashamed of some of the things they do. I think kids have too much freedom. I think people have too much freedom. Parents cannot tell the kids what to do, kids don't care about parents (p. 138).

Koun Srey echoes these views.

I watch movies which show 18, 19 year old Americans go anywhere with their boy friends and girl friends. But their mothers don't say anything. They don't care about their children. Maybe their religion says it's all right to go out. In my country it's not like that.

Cambodian parents care about their children. I know, because they tell their children to be good. . . . Parents have to look after children (p. 243).

In Cambodia children were disciplined by corporal punishment both in school and at home. Bopha finds her inability to discipline her five-year-old child 'unfair'. She does not think a child should be allowed to talk back; it shows complete lack of respect for elders. As mentioned by Koun Srey with regard to her cousin, lack of respect for elders and parents causes disharmony in families and in the community.

The above views also point out that the Khmer have definite ideas about motherhood and its responsibilities. Pu Ma says even after a child is eighteen years old or even after a child is married, it is her role as a mother to care for that child. This sense of responsibility is so great, the Khmer believe that even after a mother's death her spirit will continue to look after the children. When Pu Ma is depressed, she asks her dead mother for help. Koun Srey's story about the Human Birds (page244) shows the consequences of parental neglect, and these narrators still find these values as important as they always did.

While the American orientation towards education stresses assertive, competitive, individualistic skills leading to economic self-sufficiency, the traditional Cambodian orientation towards education stresses that

learning was the way to become useful members of a cooperative society. Useful members of the society were those who lived a Buddhist way of life, ensuring that their individual actions did not harm others. Social prestige gained through service to society was more highly valued than material wealth. This theme runs through all the narratives. Nya Srey makes a keen observation when she says she always thought education was more important than money, but that here, it is possible to make a lot of money and be an important person, with only a little education. She says this country has confused her.

In order to instill cooperative social values, Cambodian children were generally encouraged to cooperate with one another; not to compete. Ebihara points out that even in games and sports, the emphasis was on playing rather than winning (see chapter 4). Bopha, a well educated, Vietnamese medical student from Cambodia, who also attended a community college here and who now holds a professional job in this country, has rules that her five year old daughter must follow (p. 282). They are based not on individual freedom of speech and action, but on cooperative social values based on respect and consideration for others through word and action. Pu Ma, too, advises her teen-age children to be polite and respectful in school.

In Cambodia, schools were strictly educational establishments, and not places for romance and entertainment. Boys and girls were segregated in classrooms and playgrounds. As both Look Tha, a villager, and Bopha, an urbanite, show, the two sexes seldom interacted. Children did not deviate from the journey to school and back in order to play at friends' houses. Today too, the refugees look upon schools as places only for learning. Koun Srey says that the old people advise them not to have love affairs, for it would interrupt their education. Sex education in school is a difficult subject for some adolescents to participate in, as seen in Koun Srey's narrative.

Since education based on Buddhist teachings produced the right type of citizens for Cambodia, Koun Srey's mother still considers that if Koun Srey was to get a good education, she will have the ability to choose a good husband. But Pu Ma worries about her children approaching adulthood here, because peer pressure might influence them to seek love and romance on their own. She also worries that her children might marry non-Cambodians which will present a language barrier for her. It will create problems between family members, and she herself will not be able to help her children in case of difficulties, since she does not understand English. Marriage is such a

natural part of womanhood for the Khmer that even Nya Srey and Bopha who are gainfully employed still see their roles as mainly wives and mothers. As shown in Mum's and Koun Srey's narratives, even here, girls are taught household duties that will enable them to be efficient wives and mothers. In fact, Nya Srey and Mum do not believe that American girls are capable of managing households.

It appears from the narratives and also from the writings of Ebihara, and Rumbaut and Ima, that Khmer women traditionally had relative control of their own lives, especially when it came to marriage. Ideally, marriages were arranged, but even when they were not, as in Pu Ma's case, the parents' permission was sought first. But dating as it is done here, was definitely not a part of Khmer traditions, and for refugees from rural backgrounds in particular, dating is a difficult concept. An individual's freedom of action is viewed as loss of parental authority and non-caring by parents for their children. Explicit expression of physical feelings are especially difficult for the refugees to accept. Pu Ma says that in Cambodia also people loved, but they did not express their feelings in public. The free expression of love here is also another reason for her desire to return to her country. She feels she would not worry about her children's adulthood if they grew up in Cambodia where peer pressure

to go astray will be much less.

Observers of Khmer refugees view them as generally having failed to achieve economic self-sufficiency, and not as well adjusted as, for example, the Vietnamese. In addition to the Pol Pot trauma and the generally rural, non-western backgrounds, Rumbaut and Ima see the 'passive, non-aggressive, non-competitive' Khmer way of life 'with loose family structures' as contributing to this failure. But pre-Khmer Rouge history shows that for the Khmer people, a 'successful life' was one in which a person generally strived to achieve the welfare of family and society, rather than the individual achievement of material wealth. Historically, Cambodia was an agrarian country with very little technological advances in the field of agriculture. If there had been no cooperation between villagers, who constituted at least 85 percent of Cambodia's rice farming population, and who constitute the vast majority of refugees here, irrigated rice could not have been grown. Without rice, there was no livelihood for much of the population. Since the population was not economically homogeneous, the 'landless class' like Pu Ma's family could not have survived without aid from others. According to all narrators, even when people were economically self-sufficient, Cambodians traditionally helped relatives and friends so all could have better

lives. For the Cambodians, economic self-sufficiency was not to be achieved individually, but collectively. This was possible only if there was cooperation between members of the family and community. These economic needs were reinforced by social values built on Theravada Buddhist teachings professing the sanctity of life and the importance of cooperation and generosity for preserving that life.

All the narrators describe how they cooperated in achieving the welfare of the family as a whole. It is especially significant that Look Tha and Pu Ma, born into poverty and deprivation, did not consider they had earned the right to give themselves the best material life possible once they were adults. Instead, they considered it their responsibility to tend to the needs of others, both in the nuclear and extended families. In addition, the narratives also show how other members of society helped each other to survive, both in rural and urban areas.

This concern for family and society rather than the individual, is evident even in the narratives of Mum and Koun Srey, two subjects educated only in America. Mum spent her formative years from eight to twelve under the Khmer Rouge, and then as a junior high and high school student in America. Koun Srey is now a sophomore in high

school. But both refugees consider it more important to ensure the economic and emotional welfare of their families, rather than their own. For instance, Mum, who at twenty-two is gainfully employed, will not buy an easily affordable and much desired sports car because it would make her mother unhappy. She does not think that her economic independence gives her the right to acquire an emotional and social independence if they cause any discomfort to the family, particularly to her mother. Koun Srey earned an income for the first time in her life by doing a summer job last year and handed all the money to her mother to help meet their living costs. All other children in both families have acted similarly. The adults in turn try to provide economic and emotional help to other relatives and friends who are here, in Cambodia, or in refugee camps. Ima and others also say that the Khmer, more than other Southeast Asian refugee groups, extend hospitality and assistance to other Khmer who are not part of their kin group. But since many of the Khmer refugees are unemployed and the households consist of several unrelated nuclear families their capacity to generate large amounts of capital is less than that of Vietnamese refugees.

Rumbaut and Ima contend that the Khmer family and community seem 'loose' on the surface due to the absence of

obvious 'vertical and family oriented' patterns seen in the Vietnamese structure, which the authors say is a primary reason for the latter group's more immediate success in achieving 'self-sufficiency'. In contrast, I believe the narratives show that Khmer social values reinforced by Theravada Buddhist values, and now the Pol Pot tragedy, impart to them a deep moral obligation to do their duty to their people. These narratives show that it is an obligation which is not etically institutionalized by a patrilineal hierarchy, but taught emically by a way of life with deep roots, which is not immediately obvious to an outside observer.

The primary concern of the refugees has been, and still is, keeping the family together through peace and harmony, rather than through material wealth. Nya Srey and Mum, who had wealth and material comfort in Cambodia and are financially secure here, consider emotional security that comes from harmonious relations between spouses, parents and children, and siblings, more important and preferable. With regard to a second marriage, both Nya Srey, who was widowed by the Khmer Rouge when they killed her husband, and Mum, who divorced her abusive husband, say they want security and understanding with their spouses more than riches. Pu Ma, whose house is in one of the poorest neighborhoods, and who has a meager existence on

welfare, still considers it more important that her children have peace in their marriages than money and problems. Although Bopha and her husband do not have as much money as she would like, she considers herself fortunate because her husband takes good care of the family.

This outlook reflects Buddhist ideals of respecting life more than material wealth. It is also an outcome of the Pol Pot holocaust which completely destroyed the wealth and family life for these refugees. While it showed that material wealth can be had again, it also tragically demonstrated that family and friends destroyed through death can never be regained. The gratuitous actions of the Khmer Rouge also would have demonstrated how much harm can be inflicted upon others in ways that others who have not experienced such horrors may never understand. The Pol Pot tragedy, in fact, appears to have strengthened the emotional needs of refugees for one another. Mum says

To me, money is no big deal. Of course it is something you need to live, but it's not the main thing. . . . I am not like the Americans. I don't take what I have for granted. There's more to life, more to families than money and stuff. To me, to have a pretty close family is more important (p. 131).

It may seem from Mum's observation that the Khmer have not developed the right work ethic and the desire to succeed economically as many Americans think they should. An alternative interpretation is that the Khmer worldview

places a different emphasis on the importance of money as a measure of personal success. In fact, Mum herself has demonstrated that the Khmer do have the right work ethic by her hard work and successful record at school and at work. She now has a desire to become a lawyer, but hesitates to return to school simply because she feels she may not have the emotional strength due to all the tragic experiences of her life. Rather than lack of commitment or absence of an ethic of hard work, her desire to do well ironically causes her to stall. Both Bopha and Nya Srey are now gainfully employed, and Bopha still attends school for career advancement. Although Look Tha and Pu Ma are on welfare due to Look Tha's age and Pu Ma's unemployment, by overcoming severe hardships and attaining economic self-sufficiency in Cambodia they demonstrated that they have an independent work ethic and determination to succeed.

The refugee resettlement official points out that there are many entry level jobs in the electronics industry that do not require communication skills. In her view, the refugees can take up these jobs. However, if they are to adjust to this society, the first thing they must learn is English; this will happen more easily if they work daily with English speakers. They can then communicate with the larger society and exchange ideas, which may influence change among the refugees. It is perhaps more accurate to

assume that electronic assembly line jobs are not the right ones for these refugees whom co-workers describe as more "affective. . . . and leave the sense of having engaged a real human being" (p.298). Refugees tell me that when they spend many hours by themselves, whether at home or on electronic assembly lines where communication does not occur, they are troubled by Pol Pot memories.

In this country, the refugees' lack of suitable job skills and the language barrier seem to present the biggest hurdle in enabling them to find employment, as noted by many researchers. Although there might be some who shun work because of the 'welfare mentality', from my acquaintance with the Khmer, especially those with rural backgrounds and traditions of hard work, there is little doubt they have the desire to work. If they were given the right type of job training, which suits their skills and needs, and not those of various agencies, many more would be gainfully employed.

The SARYS study points out that even Khmer refugee children who have been educated here tend to choose jobs entailing not mechanical work, but human services, such as nursing and clerical assistance. The authors consider these 'low status' jobs, and the report says that this may be because the Khmer are not yet acquainted with 'high status' jobs. The report also observes that the need to

serve others seems to be a central source of life satisfaction for the Khmer. Serving others is also mentioned as an important part of life by both urban and rural narrators in this study. If these refugees concentrated more on achieving individual economic self-sufficiency and not on serving the needs of other members of family and society, they would undoubtedly be seen as having adjusted well and having met the goal of the Refugee Act. But even those like Mum, who have the opportunity to meet the American model of success, do not choose to make use of it. The authors of the SARYS study believe it probably reflects the Buddhist concept of doing good deeds to earn merit for future life. But to get a better understanding, it is also important to look at the Cambodian orientation towards education and success.

Khmer social ideals promoted a cooperative life style, and the Buddhist religion values the attainment of the right lifestyle through right actions rather than through the achievement of wealth. This was important both for secular and spiritual welfare, and generosity in kind and self were encouraged at all levels of society. Koun Srey says, "I think it's important to help people. My religion says do good things, kind things to people" (p. 248). These sentiments are echoed by the urban narrators as well. It was an individual's good conduct rather than

his wealth that brought him recognition in Cambodia. Therefore, what America perceives as 'low status' jobs entailing 'human services' are the 'high status' ones from the Khmer perspective, since for them, human life is the highest form of life one can attain. Rather than looking for merit for future lives by doing good deeds, it seems that the Khmer are trying to find fulfillment by doing what gives them the most satisfaction in this life.

Rumbaut and Ima observe that the Khmer emphasize emotional fulfillment rather than commitment. Since Buddhist teachings deal with humanity and not divinity, they necessarily explore human feelings and fulfillment. From the perspective of the Khmer, it seems that to have commitment, one must find emotional fulfillment; financial fulfillment alone does not suffice. For instance, Koun Srey says she would like to grow vegetables for a living. When I commented that it is hard work, she replied, "Growing vegetables is hard work. But I will feel happy, so it's not hard work" (p. 250). Mum sums up, "Money comes and goes. To me, the main thing is happiness. . . . It's what's within you that really counts" (p. 131).

'Modernity' (or the lack of it in the Khmer) has been suggested as an issue in adjustment by the San Diego study. It is interesting that Koun Srey sees the aggressive style of communication as 'modern' in the same manner that the

San Diego study sees it. But she does not wish to adopt it. She says

In class. . . . some people are modern. . . . They say 'shut up'. I just say 'quiet', but then if they don't listen I stop saying. I never fight with anybody. I just make friends (p. 250).

Mum, a very able and articulate English speaker, who appears as well adjusted as one could be, says,

One of my girlfriends. . . . If you see her you would think that she was probably born here, she is so Americanized. The way she talks, the way she eats, the way she acts, what she wouldn't do. . . . She is a year older than me, but she acts like a kid. When we get together, she is always fighting with my friends. I can't recall getting into an argument with any friends. I think everybody has different beliefs for themselves (p. 132).

It seems that for these refugees, the aggressive style of communication reflects immaturity and fighting, and the latter goes against their social ethics since it causes disharmony between members of the society.

From Mum's statement above, it is evident that Buddhist teachings of tolerance and openness to other ideas have played an important part in the adjustment of the refugees. Nya Srey says that even the monks tell her to go out and become acquainted with American society. The SARYS study says that the Khmer are considered to be the least ethnocentric and nationalistic of refugee groups which, for example, makes it easy for school personnel counseling them. The report, however, questions this openness, since

it has been established that ethnic resilience rather than Americanization, helps children to achieve academically. As the narratives point out, these refugees stop to question how much they should become 'American'. All of them have a very strong sense of being Cambodian. Nya Srey speaks for all when she says, "Everything in (America) is good for my children to learn about. It depends on how you act" (p. 161). Although they may appear passive to outside observers, as the monk pointed out, they are more aggressive within themselves, in their self-awareness. Their 'step by step coping style' which guides them to action they feel is right, helps them not to lose their ethnic resilience. The SARYS Study says that the Khmer face limited job opportunities because of their rote learning methods which do not enhance their 'critical thinking'. What we have seen, however, is that their worldview is built on critical thinking. The difference is in the concepts and subjects they think about. Their openness does not appear to create problems for them since they obviously question the consequences of their actions. It is their lack of English speaking skills and different communication styles that make them easy targets for exploitation. As shown in the narratives, they do not want to hurt the feelings of others by aggression. They consider the 'successful' Vietnamese as 'grabbing' due to

their aggressiveness. The following quotation from Chhim sums up the Khmer perspective of success and freedom.

Personal independence is given high value by Cambodians, but it is not conceived in the same way Americans do. For a Cambodian, independence would mean freedom from obligation or commitment beyond his defined role of his status in a given situation. . . . Cambodians have felt little compulsion to succeed in a material sense. Acquisitiveness is not a dominant characteristic; adequacy is the objective in life (Chhim 1987, 14).

This emic interpretation of Cambodian refugee adjustments demonstrate that for the Khmer, 'successful social adjustment' does not necessarily mean the American goal of 'economic achievement'. Thus, the Khmer have not adjusted according to American ideals, but rather, according to their own ideals. But a lack of awareness of the Khmer perspectives, and the imposition of American expectations and ideals on Khmer refugee adjustments have led to misinterpretations of their behavior and actions, and the view that the Khmer refugees have not made 'successful adjustments.'

CHAPTER 13

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cambodian Barriers to Adjustments in the United States

The narratives in this study clearly demonstrate that when the Khmer Rouge tried to eradicate the social, cultural, and religious values of the Cambodian people, the regime succeeded only outwardly. In order to survive, the victims of the revolution complied with the coercive actions of their captors, while inwardly continuing to believe and draw strength from their pre-revolutionary social system.

Before the communist Khmer Rouge came into power, peasants had never been forced to change the totality of their life styles. In early history the Khmer acquired only those social and cultural features they wanted from Indian culture. When the French tried to force administrative and linguistic changes, the Khmer rebelled. They have generally resisted change by force.

As refugees in the United States, the narrators again face an upheaval in their lives. They are confronted with conflicting values and beliefs. As indicated in their accounts, the narrators fled their homeland and sought

refuge here, without prior planning or knowledge of the United States. In this country too, they turn to their past in order to understand and make sense of the world they are in.

Undoubtedly, memories of life and death under the Khmer Rouge continue to haunt Cambodian refugees and interfere with their adjustments in the United States. When refugees hear of the sufferings of relatives and friends trapped in Cambodia and refugee and border camps, they are deeply saddened; this affects their emotional and physical health as well as the choices they make while living in the United States.

The historical enmity and mistrust and the differences in values between the Khmer and Vietnamese continue to affect Khmer refugees' adjustments in the United States. While these problems may dissolve over time, Khmer-Vietnamese conflicts from Indochina certainly bear a connection to the refugees' adjustment today. In the foreseeable future the Khmer will not look upon the Vietnamese as a model to emulate.

Throughout Cambodian history, the villagers were isolated from western ideas and influences. Since the vast majority of Khmer refugees came to the United States from rural backgrounds, they came with virtually no knowledge about social, cultural, religious, or economic differences

between here and Cambodia. For example, Look Tha, a refugee from a peasant background, observes that when he decided to come to the United States he did not anticipate any cultural adjustments; he expected to maintain his old traditions. He was surprised to be told by his ESL teacher in the refugee camp that he should take steps to preserve his cultural heritage.

United States Barriers to Cambodian Refugee Adjustments

Since America is not a communist country, Look Tha assumed that the refugees would not have to change their identities and values. On the contrary, refugee policies and service providers in the United States push Cambodians to change their ways to suit American ideals, whether they are capable of changing or whether they are ready for it, to prove their 'successful adjustment and economic self-sufficiency'.

While the Vietnamese value economic success, the narratives in this study show that the Khmer consider the emotional welfare of the family and society more important. Though they acknowledge the importance of money, they do not believe economic achievement necessarily means success. These ideals are based on their Theravada Buddhist worldview and way of life. A move from a cooperative society to a competitive one has been difficult for these refugees; their adjustments based on their social values

are often misinterpreted by western observers as failure. So too are Cambodian methods of communication and social interaction, which emphasize non-aggression and social harmony. Such a demeanor makes the Cambodians easy targets for exploitation. In this situation, refugees from both rural and urban backgrounds look to their past to provide a sense of self-worth and stability in a culture in which their worldview and life styles are not highly valued.

The lack of knowledge of the English language remains a strong barrier to adjustments for the Khmer refugees. They are unable to find employment or interact easily with other Americans. This problem has not been solved by current ESL teachers. Even if conscious of the problem and well intentioned, they have not been able to assess adequately the needs and backgrounds of Cambodian refugees.

Recommendations

Bousquet points out that

The social scientists are proposing a research model in order to satisfy government and funding agencies rather than the Indochinese refugees. . . . The economic interpretation as the theoretical orientation taken in these studies on the Indochinese refugees, inevitably determines the power relations created between the observer and the observed. . . . The social scientists writing and publishing papers on refugees, generated sets of questions and problems in which 'scientific knowledge' is intended to contribute to policy making regarding the refugees. . . . (and they) are imposing their own American values (Bousquet 1988, 1-2).

Refugee policies that are made based on "scientific knowledge", without consideration for refugees' needs or perspectives cannot be expected to succeed in meeting their stated goals. In assessing their effectiveness, the trend has been to blame the victim rather than the cause.

In my view, the 'failure' of Khmer refugees to adjust and become economically successful is largely a reflection on the practice of applying inappropriate scientific knowledge and host values alone, in both formulating policies for the Khmer and in assessing their effectiveness. In contrast, The Tribal Lao Training Project (Freeman, Nguyen, and Hartsell 1985) was successful in placing participants in employment because it first addressed their needs while also giving them appropriate training. Similarly, I was successful in teaching English to refugees because first I conducted a thorough assessment of needs based on extensive interviews and observations, and then designed lessons to meet their needs.

If we are to understand the social adjustment of Khmer refugees, we must look at their lives as a whole, and understand their needs and adjustment both from our perspective, as well as theirs. We must be sensitive to cultural barriers to adjustment that derive not only from Cambodian traditions and outlooks, but also from those of the United States. This is imperative if we are to

institute policies that will aid them and not hamper them in their adjustments to America. Only in this way can we help the refugees to help themselves. With this view in mind, I make the following recommendations which are aimed at enabling Khmer refugees to become a productive segment of the American society.

1. Since there can be no social adjustment or economic independence without English language acquisition, the first priority is to enhance English language learning capabilities of Khmer refugees. This is best done by developing language lessons that meet the refugees' present needs, and presenting these lessons in a manner that demonstrates an understanding of, and consideration for, Cambodians' cultural values, their distinctive history, and their holocaust experience.
2. To alleviate pressure on the American public as well as the refugees themselves with regard to refugees' economic independence, regard the Khmer ideals of social service as their strength and not weakness, and provide job training opportunities in appropriate fields: child-care, nursing, teaching, catering, etc. Such vocations should lead to both refugees' economic independence and job satisfaction.
3. Use the historical entrepreneurship of Khmer women who now head most of the refugee households as concrete

experience and help them to achieve economic independence by providing financial aid and guidance in starting small businesses such as grocery stores, bakeries, or tailor shops.

4. Given the importance of Buddhist teachings and beliefs in the refugees' daily lives and the trust that Cambodian people have in Buddhist monks, use the traditional mental health and social counseling services of Buddhist monks which are free of charge.
5. Improve conditions in refugee camps where many refugees have families and loved ones, and thereby improve the mental health of refugees here. Though the United States government has no direct control over these camps, conditions can be improved immediately through (a) private agencies such as Aid To Refugee Children Without Parents Inc., and (b) long term political pressure for more realistic refugee policies, both in the United States and internationally.
6. Since the Khmer community does not have a strong support network made up of the more successfully adjusted refugees, develop programs to encourage successful Khmer elite to become involved in helping the more rural refugees in bridging the cultural gap.

APPENDIX

SAMPLES FROM NARRATIVES

Sample from Mum's Narrative

I was always with my brothers. We go to school together because we were about the same age you know, a year apart. We had to go to two different schools. In the morning we go to Cambodian school, and afternoon we go to French school. We had to wear blue and white in Cambodian school. But I think in French school, we could wear whatever we wanted. I remember in Cambodian school the girls had to wear blue skirt and a white shirt. Sometimes we will have tutors in the house too. So my dad was really pushing us to learn.

Later my two older brothers used to stay in a French house where they teach the kids and stuff. Back in Cambodia they lived there. They would eat French food or whatever. They stayed there for a while, I think until the war started getting worse.

Sample from Nya Srey's Narrative

I was close to my father than to my mother. You know why? Because mother, very busy. She was very busy. Because my father didn't really work, he was a politician, didn't really have regular work every day. So he stay home most of the time. My mother always go to the rice field if my father is home. She go there for a long time, two week or something like that. Left me alone with my father. Since they didn't get along she didn't care, right? My father was more affectionate to me more than my mom. My mom, I know she love me, but she is not the type, affectionate people. She didn't show, she didn't say, she didn't really get close to anybody, didn't show affection to anybody. That's the type she is. It is better my father to be more like her, and my mother like my father, instead of the opposite ways.

Sample from Look Tha's Narrative

I am a child of the farmer. I was born in Battambang, November 6, 1926. When I was four years old I have a disease--smallpox. About fifteen days I sleep on the banana leaf on the floor, inside the house. I sleep on the banana leaf because all my body was full of boils and pus. If I sleep on the clothes, it stick. I was very sick. Smallpox entered my eyes. I could not see very well. Scarce hospital. Medicine, all traditional, from coconuts, olive, and things from trees. Take all the things, crush, squeeze, got water and drink. And some other medicine to put on your body. I don't remember a lot about the disease, but my parents, they tell me.

Sample from Pu Ma's Narrative

I think every day, you know. Every time at night I think. I think because I live here I have a lot of food, you know. I think about my mother and my husband, he dead in Cambodia, Pol Pot to kill, you know. And another people. I don't know why the Pol Pot kill. You know my mother and my husband very, very polite, don't have fight with another people, you know. I don't know why Pol Pot kill my husband and my mother. I think every night maybe my mother and my husband come with me, maybe I am happy. When I eat a lot of food I think my mother to die, you know, don't have the food in the stomach. My husband don't have. When I think I say with my children, "When I eat a lot of food I wish your grandmother and your father eat with me." When communist Pol Pot kill my husband and my mother, my children too young. But they know. They remember. My older son remember.

Sample From Koun Srey's Narrative

When I was four years old, I live in the small camp near the mountains with my grandmother, mom, dad, uncle, and my two brothers.

One day I went to take a bath with my brother at the lake far away from my house in afternoon. When came back home, the way from the lake to my house, I saw the ghost went up the tree. That ghost has long hair and wore the white cloth. When I saw that ghost went up on the tree on the last step, I saw that ghost was disappear. I doubt that is a ghost, so I am quickly ran away from that tree. When I got home, I told my parent about the woman went up on the tree and disappear. My parent said that a ghost.

When I was small I never scare about ghost, because I never see how their face look like. I just saw the first time, when I went to the lake, but I just saw her back. I didn't see her face.

Sample from Bopha's Narrative

My mom was a very kind person, but mostly she got tricked. People take her money but don't give it back. I told her she must not give money to people. But thick faced people come and tell her their child is dying, and my mom couldn't stand to hear that.

Beginning of month people got salaries, so first week of month I ride my bicycle to collect money. When I was young my servant came with me. Later, I go by myself. I had to go to collect money from market people. But people say they have no money. Some people try to please me with food. Later I learned that I must not eat food because I can't ask for money. Some people hide when they saw me coming.

Sometimes I was mad with my mom because she give money to these people. Sometimes my mom had to plead with me to collect money. I am still mad, but I feel sorry and I go. My mom has no story; I can say mom will beat me.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barron, John, and Anthony Paul. Murder of A Gentle Land. New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1977.
- Becker, Elizabeth. When the War was Over. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986.
- Bousquet, Gisele. The Refugees Next Door: A Critical Approach to the Studies on Indochinese Refugees in the United States. A paper delivered at the Eighty Seventh Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Phoenix, November 1988.
- Bowen, Betsy L. To Leave is to Die a Lot: The Life History of a Vietnamese Refugee. Master of Arts Thesis, Faculty of Social Science, San Jose Sate University, 1983.
- Burchett, Wilfred. The China Cambodia Vietnam Triangle. Chicago: Vanguard Books, 1981.
- Chandler, David P. A History of Cambodia. Boulder: Westview Press, 1983.
- Chhim, Sun H. Introduction to Cambodian Culture. Sacramento: Bilingual Education Office, California State Department Of Education, 1987.
- Clifford, James and George E. Marcus. Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- Crapanzano, Vincent. Waiting: The Whites Of South Africa. New York: Random House, 1986.
- Criddle, Joan D. and Teeda Butt Mam. To Destroy You is No Loss. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987.
- Ebihara, May Mayko. Svay, A Khmer Village in Cambodia. Ph.D. Thesis, Anthropology, Columbia University, 1968.
- Freeman, James M. Untouchable. An Indian Life History. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979.

- _____. Knowledge, Compassion, and Involvement.
San Jose State University: President's Annual Scholar's
Address, May 1984.
- _____. Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese American Lives.
Stanford: Stanford University Press, To be Published.
- Grant, Jonathan S. ed. Cambodia: The Widening War in
Indochina. New York: Washington Square Press, 1971.
- Haines, David W. Refugees in the United States. Westport:
Greenwood Press, 1985.
- Hall, D.G.E. A History of South-East Asia. New York: St
Martin's Press, 1955.
- Huffman, Franklin E. Modern Spoken Cambodian. New Haven:
Yale University Press, 1970.
- Ima, Kenji. et al. Adjustment Strategies of the Khmer
Refugees in San Diego, California: Six Ethnographic
Case Studies. San Diego: Study Sponsored by Union of
Pan Asian Communities, San Diego, California, 1983.
- Kiernan, Ben and Chanthou Boua. Peasants and Politics in
Kampuchea 1942-1981. London: Zed Press, 1982.
- Loescher, Gil, and John A. Scanlon. Calculated Kindness:
Refugees and America's Half-Open Door, 1945-Present.
New York: Free Press, 1986.
- Mandelbaum, David G. The Study of Life History: Gandhi.
Current Anthropology 14, no. 3 (June).
- Marcus, George E. and Michael M. Fischer. Anthropology as
Cultural Critique. Chicago: The University of Chicago
Press, 1986.
- May, Someth. Cambodian Witness. New York: Random House,
1986.
- Ngor, Haing. A Cambodian Odyssey. New York: Macmillan
Publishing Company, 1987.
- Ouk, Mory, Franklin E. Huffman, and Judy Lewis. Handbook
for Teaching Khmer-Speaking Students. California:
Folsom Cordova Unified School District, 1988.

- Owen, Tom Choken. Southeast Asian Mental Health: Treatment, Prevention, Services, Training, and Research. Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985.
- Rabinow, Paul. Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.
- Rumbaut, Ruben G., and Kenji Ima. The Adaptation of Southeast Asian Refugee Youth: A Comparative Study. Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988.
- Spradley, James P. The Ethnographic Interview. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1979.
- _____. Participant Observation. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1980.
- Stuart-Fox, Martin, and Bunheang Ung. The Murderous Revolution. Australia: Alternative Publishing Cooperative Limited, 1985.
- Shawcross, William. Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979.
- _____. The Quality of Mercy. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984.
- Szymusiak, Molyda. The Stones Cry Out: A Cambodian Childhood, 1975-1980. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986.
- Vickery, Michael. Cambodia 1975-1982. Boston: South End Press, 1984.
- Welaratna, Usha. Cambodian Refugees: Factors Affecting their Assimilation and English Language Acquisition. The CATESOL Journal, Volume 1, Number 1, November 1988.
- Yathay, Pin. Stay Alive, My Son. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.
- Yu, E. and Lui, W. Methodological Problems and Policy Implications in Vietnamese Refugee Research. International Migrational Review, No. 2, Summer 1986.