

Kunrath Lam

Immigrant Stories Transcription

Hello, my name is Kunrath Lam. I am Cambodian. I have been living in United States for the last 32 years. I was born in Cambodia, Phnom Penh, 1972, before the country collapsed, the communists took over. So during the communists take over, my family and I- I had one brother, and one sister, a mom, and father. We lived in Phnom Penh and the communists evacuated us from the city to the jungle. My father was a chemist, working as a chemist. My mom also a university graduate before the country collapsed. So when they evacuated my family and made other Cambodian [go] to the jungles, on the way a lot of people killed, die, starvation. And then in the village 100 member of family that very educated, by then end after three years, only three family left. All of them was executed and killed. Along my young brother was only two years old and he was sick and my mom took him to the communist doctor and then they injects coconut milk to his body and then he become paralyzed and die after 52 days without doctor, without any medicine, because [we were] in the jungle.

My mom side, my dad side, we lost almost 200 members of our family. They tortured them so bad and then no food to eat. My family and I survived because we ate frog and mice and lizard, and then leaf and roots to survive.

I was a city girl. I worked and I'm not fast enough like those farmer girls. They put me in ant nest, so it bit you a lot. Yeah, the red ant, yeah.

After- during 1979, the communists collapse, the Vietnamese took over. My father stayed there, and then the same thing, and we feel if we stay in Cambodia, maybe the future is not good for myself and my sister. So we decided to escape from Cambodia to Thailand because my father listened to Asian American, Radio Free Asia, it's American radio. They said if you are former government worker, they are accepting your application in the refugee camp as long as you have all the proof. And my father kept because that is his life. He kept all that document and then we escaped, doing my escape from Cambodia to Thailand. We have to disguise ourselves that we are not the same family and we would stay in the mud outside and to our skin really dark.

And then my father decided to escape first, that day, and then he escaped. It was a rainy day and he make to each parole. It was a heavy rain and they did not come to check my father during the parole. And then they found out, the spies, they found out that my father escaped. They told us that by the sunset they will bring my father's head back. Cry and cry and then two week later we have received a letter from my father that he make it to one of

the camps, refugee camps. So please send the daughter, my sister and I. We was like 11 or 12 years old at that time. My mom hired smuggler, like 6, 7 smugglers, like around \$500 US dollar and then her gold band wedding ring, the gold band. And then she cut in half, she stretch it and then she sew on my dress- like here- so the robber or the smuggler would not know where I hide it. It was like only 7 or 8 gram of the gold, not a lot, but at least something for me to, if somebody captured me or do something, I just pull out and just give them that so that they release us, not to capture us.

I escaped, three days, two night in the jungle with my sister and a smuggler, and then during the escape there was, in the jungle, no water, no food. And then in the jungle at night time [as] we escape I can smell the dead body, the bobby trap. And at one point [as] we escape and I always sit almost into an explosive mine and yeah, and I was like, if I put my hand down, the whole group that escaped would be dead.

During the escape, I kept thinking, oh, I will have a good life if I make it. Oh, I will have good food to eat if I make it. I might have a good education if I make it. One more step. It feel like one more mile because you're so exhausted. And we were the small kids among the escape and they keep stepping on us, stepping on us, and I grab onto one of the smugglers, onto his neck and shirt, and told him, you cannot leave me in the jungle. You took my mom's money. You cannot. You cannot let me stay here. You have to help my sister and I. And I just call out [to] my sister and hold onto him, so two of them did not left me. And then during the escape in the jungle, you cannot wear shoes, because if you wear shoes and it's muddy, it's not fast enough, so it has to be barefoot. And then my father he told me that, before I came in, like 2 or 3 days, he kept having a dream: go pick up your daughter, we are at the border and where people escape, and then get to the camp. There's a camp, refugee camp people just escape out and then just out the camp keep going. And he said he have dream like 2 or 3 night in a row so he kept waiting for us in the border but he could not, did not see. And then that time, for the last day he came back and he sat down in the camp and then I came running to him and he said it was the best present he ever had at that time because we were united at least, my sister and I, make it to one of the refugee camp. And now my mom left, she still have to escape, make a big escape to meet us again.

She escape. She bicycle from country to country and she find food for us and she's like, very strong lady.

After my mom reunite, then we have to find another smuggler, escape to Khao-I-Dang camp. And that was very hard too because my mom doesn't know the territory, never been in the camp, and then we have to hire smuggler to take us to the camp. So during the escape we gave the smuggler like almost \$1000 and during the escape we cannot talk. We have to whisper, we have to wear black, we have to crawl. You know, across the mountain you cannot walk, you crawl like this: your knee and your leg and your belonging, you can't have

any belonging, only water and a little food on your neck, and then you crawl. They don't want people to get into the refugee camp. If they saw, they would shoot you down. Thousands and thousands of Cambodian died during that crossing line, the three barbed wire were very high. They cut the barbed wire so we can sneak in and they pull it open.

And then the next morning, we wash ourselves and we headed to the headquarters to get the camp leader to know that we're here as refugees. So my father, he applied to many different countries. He applied to France, to Australia, to Canada, to Japan, everywhere with his document and then luckily United States accept us before everybody else and I was so happy that I feel like oh my bone is like flying, you know, it's a golden bone you know its... people have to be chosen to come into United States not just everybody can make it. And after 6 months my mom and my dad passed the study and we come to the United States directly to St. Paul, 1983 November 7. And we never forget that day, every year until now, it's our freedom. We celebrate every time on November 7.

Cheng Heng is my husband's name and lucky, Heng is lucky. Cheng is my husband's name and my mother's name also. And Heng is lucky. Even you step on a bad thing, you always lucky. I don't it's true or not but that's what it's said like that. That's what it means, Cheng Heng is always lucky. Yeah, very lucky. It was hard the first time.

It was hard, the first Cambodian restaurant. And who know about Cambodian food? It was hard to describe, oh this is good, this tastes...try my food. You know like, when you see customers, you feel like you want to carry them from the outside to come in. From the beginning because they don't know about....they know about Thai, Vietnam, Chinese food but Cambodian, no. Hesitate to try but when they try ,they keep coming back, they keep bringing friends, multiplying every day, every day, it makes you so happy. And the newspaper, the *Pioneer Press*, help us a lot too. Yeah, I really appreciate life in here. I don't take it for granted. I appreciate it every single day.

When I first open, I feel there's people in the refugee camp that sent back home from the camp that I used to live in, Khao-I-Dang camp, the Thailand camp. When they close out, they sent back Cambodia refugees to Cambodia, and those people got discriminated with their own people because you [are] a traitor, you get out and now you come back, and they don't have a place to stay or they put in a very desert and then no school for children. So I heard about that, I feel I am Cambodian, I need to help. I need to help my people, my refugee people. So I raised money, tip money that I have, with a lot with customers helping too. And I build first school in 2005. If I can donate a little bit, help out maybe, the future is more brighter and more better than what they used to be. So I built the one school and named it after my daughter Sarah Lam. So I build one school for that first school and then 2007, I build a second school with the help of the tip money and the customer help. And the

school I build is funded by, the teacher is paid by the government and then we just build a school.

I always stay in St. Paul. Yeah, all we have never moved to anywhere else—always in the St. Paul. I maintained my old culture, my morals. I still practice Buddhism, that's the most important, my religion. That's the freedom, religion, that have in the United States. That's the most important.

I do miss home. Whenever I go, I do miss home because that's the where your culture, your language is. And you feel belonged to because of the language. And here you feel same, you belong to here too, many- thirty year later you feel the same but not the same as home. The real food, the real vegetables that you eat, the temple that you go...it's like home. Home, home like something missing. When you go there you feel completed. You come here you are lucky, Don't take it for granted, you are very lucky to be here. You'll work very, very hard, you'll try very hard in order to get here, not easy. Not just get on a plane come to the United States, no. For us thirty years ago, no. We went through so many things in order to have our life this way and then, not easy. People come easy, maybe they don't appreciate it. For me I do appreciate it so much because not just one day you make it to this. I had to step by step, step by step in order to make it this far.