

TESTIMONY OF HENRY NELSON, on August, 1992, at the Cable Access Studio, St. Paul, Minnesota. The examination was conducted by Jim Dorsey.

MR. DORSEY: Good evening. My name is Jim Dorsey. We're here tonight to talk with Henry Nelson as part of a project called the Khmer Oral History Project through the offices of the Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee and, I'm told, the Minnesota Historical Society. We'll be talking with Mr. Nelson about his experiences growing up in Cambodia and then living under the Khmer Rouge. Today's date is Thursday, August 13, 1992.

EXAMINATION BY MR. DORSEY:

JD: Henry, when were you born?

HN: I was in 1954 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

JD: And tell me about your family.

HN: My family, actually we have 13 people including my parents, we have 15 member. I was born in Phnom Penh and raised in Phnom Penh when I was young and my father was a soldier. My mother opened a grocery.

JD: In 1975, where were you living?

HN: In 1975, because of the job that my father working have to be changed so they move him to Battambang, so we all move to Battambang.

JD: Your father, your mother and all your brothers and sisters?

HN: Yes. All of my family, yes.

JD: What were you doing there?

HN: There I was a student.

JD: And what were you studying?

HN: Study in college. In 1975 I was ready to go in the University.

JD: Do you recall when the Khmer Rouge came to power?

HN: Pardon me?

JD: Do you recall when the Khmer Rouge came to power?

HN: Definitely. Definitely. Khmer Rouge come to the power in 1975, the 17 of April.

JD: And what happened the day they came into town?

HN: It was very unorganized the day they got into town. I still remember that because I am old enough at that time and I know what's going on. The day of the 17 of April the Khmer Rouge start to come into town. And the first night they come in that night, the first they come in I see a few people was shot and killed by Khmer Rouge soldiers. And I don't know what's going on but people's deaths.

JD: And then did the Khmer Rouge come to your house?

HN: Yes in the morning that they Khmer Rouge riding in the jeep, there's three of them in the jeep, they come to my house and then the pick up my father. I don't know what's going on but they asked for my father, to get on the jeep with them.

JD: What did your father say?

HN: My father say nothing. First they look at my father and they see my father have a watch, an Omega watch on his hand. They say they would like to have it. And my father seem like he don't want to give to them, but they look really mad when my father acting don't want to give to him. So my father decide he have to give to him. So he take off his watch and give to that guy who request for the watch. Then they get the guns, tell my father, point the guns at my father and tell him to get on the jeep. And he got on the jeep. So I realize it's not a good situation for him at all.

JD: Your father was a captain at that time?

HN: Yes he's a captain. He fought in the war a lot with the Americans. He serve under American republican in Cambodia under Lon Nol Regime. Lon Nol was a president by that time and Lon Nol deal with the Americans.

JD: How did it feel when you saw your father being taken away?

HN: I quite pretty well understand that my father is gonna be in big trouble. Because these people is not nice. I see a few people deaths the first they come in. And they point the gun at my father ask him to get on the jeep, kind of forcing him to go. So I know that it's not good for him.

JD: Was your father in uniform that day?

HN: He take off the uniform. He know that, he know quite what was going on pretty well. He also want to escape to Thailand too, but he have no chance so he just stay with all the kids and he take off his uniform. But still, I know that those Khmer Rouge have the spy all over the town since they fought with us many years ago so they know who's who.

JD: What happened to your father?

HN: I never saw him again. He was gone from that day, ever.

JD: Did anyone ever tell you what happened to him?

HN: I, people who came through the place where my mother and me was evacuated from the town, they just say that they saw thousands and thousands of soldiers executed at the Tipa Dai mountains. And my mother just cried, and she know that my father not alive no more.

JD: You mention that you and your mother were evacuated.

HN: Yes. Just a few days later after Khmer Rouge had been all over the town, he told the people that America will bomb the town and they want all of the people get out of town in about three days. So get whatever you can get.

JD: And what did you do?

HN: We pack up the stuff that we should pack up. We just get a little rice with us and a few clothes to put out there. And they evacuate us into the jungle. There's a place with no home or nothing, just trees there. And they told us, "Okay. You stay here." And we so surprised because what's here? It's nothing. It's jungle and there's mountain there. And so you stay here, you make a place for you to live here. And don't go nowhere. They really mean it then. They look at us so mean and they have a gun in their hand. And we don't want to say anything more because we know that this is really a serious situation and that we cannot complain about it.

JD: How did you get to the jungle? Were you taken by truck?

HN: No, we walk. We walk all the way there. And we never walk this far. You know that people in the town they really live in the comfortable life and they never go there. But they have to this time. Thousands and thousands of peoples. Some of them that who really old die on the way walking to the jungle. The old people and some of the babies that never get under the sun, burn like that, die on the way. I saw many people who don't want to get out of their home, was executed. They executed those people who just want to stay in their home, want to stay in their property. And they tell them to leave, and they give them a real order. They say, "I come back next time, I see you, you gonna be stay here forever." They use the word "stay here forever on your property" that mean they execute you there, that you live there on the property.

JD: I understand. How long did you stay in the jungle?

HN: We stay in the jungle for all the way since 1975 to 1979, then the Vietnamese forces.

JD: So did you make your own dwelling?

HN: Yes, we make our own house. It's not really a house, a cottage to stay. It was really uncomfortable. If it's raining we get wet, really wet. And mosquito. And people get diarrhea because of this unsanitary and there no medications there.

JD: How many of you were living in that hut that you built?

HN: My mother and all the thirteen.

JD: The thirteen children?

HN: Yes.

JD: How did you get enough food to eat during that time?

HN: We have some that we brought with us, but just a couple days. That's all they say, take food for a couple days because Americans gonna bomb the town. But after those couple days it will be okay to go back. So we just have enough food for a couple days. After that couple day, we started starving. We get whatever we can. We dig whatever under the ground that we can find, but the thing that we should not eat at all. And we eat all those stuff. Many people get a poison, because they eat the stuff that they never knew of, and die. And we still have like, watch, good clothes. We give all those that we can for rice.

JD: You exchanged them?

HN: We exchanged them for rice.

JD: Who would you trade them with?

HN: We trade them with the farmers. Because at that time the farmers, the ignorant people, have a very good priority. The Khmer Rouge love those people. The Khmer Rouge give those people enough food to eat. But the people who come from the town, that you look to be a town people, you're not going to get nothing to eat.

JD: Then what happened? Were you eventually sent away to work somewhere?

HN: Oh, then the Khmer Rouge start to collecting information from each family. They asking your history, your biography, your resume. So each one of the family member have to give them a resume. Who you are, if you are a student, what grade you have. They tell us to give them all this information, by giving us an idea. Saying that you give us the truth and honesty the best you can give the information about yourself because we gonna get you back in the town to help the government to build our country back. Then we give out the true information that we have. Then my two brothers, one is in law school, one is in university studying about science. They get that truth first, to the reform camps. At the reform camps they use them as a cow. They put the yoke on their necks, make them do a job at the farm and using a strap behind them. Hit behind them just like a

cow. Then they can't afford to stay there no more, they escape from the reform camp. They caught them, because we are not familiar with the jungle. We don't know the territory so they just run. They think that they just run forward west then they will hit Thailand. So then they go west, but in the jungle there a lot of Khmer Rouge hiding there. They know what's going on. They really know what's going on. They really have a good experience about it, so they catch my two brother and they kill them. They brought back to my mom his underwear. They throw the underwear to my mom and they say, "This is your kid that not obey 'anka.'" "Anka" is the government. They call the government, they name "anka," so when they use the word "anka" everybody have to be scared and have to obey it. They say, "Your two sons not obey 'anka'." Then, "Here. Example. So don't let any other of your kid do that anymore." So they underwear has blood and you know that they were executed.

JD: How about you? Were you put to work?

HN: Me, they put me to work too, after they got all of the information. Then they sent me to the front line, they call "the first force" for the country economic rebuilt. The people who sent for the first force is you single. You not married. Then they assume that you are strong people they can send to the front line. People who are married, they leave you behind as a second force. So you are fourteen, thirteen and you are not married, they assume that you should go to the first front line, too. They classify those to be a first force for the country economic rebuilt. Then I sent in among those people, to the front line to work.

JD: And what sort of work did they have you do?

HN: Grow wheat, grow rice. We dig a well. We make a dam to generate electric. But it's amazing, no country in the world build it that way. They build it with wood across the river and just put the soil in the wood. They put the wood on both side and just put the soil in the middle. And the dam won't handle, cannot maintain there because water is coming so hard. And it just break the dam and hundreds and hundreds of kids died in dam. And they let the kids dig the well. So the kids dig the well and there is nothing to protect the kids. So many, many kids dig the well and the ground just collapse on them and they die in there. I think that they just try to do as much as they can to eliminate the people.

JD: How far was the place where you worked from the little hut in the jungle where your mother lived?

HN: They sent me from the jungle to a place that take me a walk five or six days to be there.

JD: You had to walk five of six days to get there?

HN: We walk five of six days to be there to work.

JD: And once you were there, where did you live?

HN: We live in the group. Hundreds of kids sleep in the group that they just put some kind of plastic cover on the tops for you and that's it. You sleep under it. A lot of them sleep just that way.

JD: And what time would you get up in the morning?

HN: In the morning its about four o'clock, the bell rings.

JD: And then what would you do?

HN: When the bell rings we have to wake up and go there.

JD: We would be walking with our eyes closed and we cannot even see the road. I lost my path and had to walk through there. We don't even see it good and our eyes are closing and everybody have to do that because we afraid they're going to execute if we don't obey "anka". Just like they say.

JD: And how long would you work each day?

HN: We work since four o'clock in the morning. Then you get out of work until eight or nine o'clock. Then they let you go back to the camps. When you go back to the camp you have dinner by that time. A very small dinner that you have. And then after the dinner you cannot go to sleep yet. We all so tired. We just want to have time to rest but you can't. After the dinner, they have a bell ring call you for the meeting. Meeting, meeting all the time. That's why the people who been here in the United States, when they heard the word "meeting" it really hurt them a lot. Pain. And I not really like it too much either when I hear the word "meeting", but I just realize that, "No. This is not Khmer Rouge meeting."

JD: What would happen at a Khmer Rouge meeting?

HN: When they have the meeting, they have people executed. In front of everybody at the meeting. They call the name of the people like today you go to work or we have some kid or some adult that is there, they are kind of tired so they take a rest. But everybody not allowed to rest yet. So they take a rest, but they notify that person action. Then at the meeting they call that people up, and they say, "This person is cheating all their friends and not obey "anka". This person have to be executed." And then they execute that person right at the meeting.

JD: How would they execute them?

HN: They execute them by shoot them, sometime they execute them by put them under the wheel. Tie them up with the wheel and they let the wheel roll on them. They do it that way. Or sometimes they hit them with a stick, so they don't have to use the bullet. They

say they save the bullet to fight with Americans. We keep this bullet to fight an American.

JD: How long did you stay in the camp?

HN: I stayed in that camp for three years in there. To work build those dam, those farm. And people, my friend who I work with, they starving to death. I even had a friend who worked close to me and he just got so weak. And I am also weak. I got swollen. My legs swollen, my hands swollen, my face swollen, because I don't have enough food. I don't have enough salt for my body to circulate it. So I get swollen, I exhaust. I walk with a cane, but I still go to work.

JD: How many days a week would you work?

HN: We work seven days a week.

JD: Were you ever given a chance to go home to see your mother?

HN: I'm scared to ask them. I'm really scared to ask them, because I knew that they will kill me someday. I realize that already. So I try to do the best to please them, to make them see that I am a really strong worker. I really want to help "anka" to build the country. Because the people who from the town, the student that have high education, sooner or later they execute those people. My professor who been there with me was executed.

JD: Why was he executed?

HN: He's a professor, so he have a knowledge. Then sure that he don't like communists, Khmer Rouge to be treat the people that way. The Khmer Rouge also understand that. They understand that the knowledge people don't like them so much. So they try to do the best to execute all those knowledge people and keep illiterate people, who it's easy for them to use.

JD: At a certain point, did you ever have a run-in with the Khmer Rouge?

HN: What do you mean at the point run-in with the Khmer Rouge?

JD: I'm sorry. I mean, did they take you aside and try to execute you?

HN: Yes. I working there for about a year later, I heard one of my third brother-I'm the fourth brother-my third brother was executed because he use the bad language with the group leader. They assign one leader to handle ten people. So he use the bad language to that leader because he starving, he don't have enough food to eat and he complain about it. Then they execute him. They say he not obey "anka". He is not strong enough, he is not satisfied enough for "anka". So they execute him. Then they send me a letter saying that your mother hopes that they want you back. So I believe them. I go back home.

Along the way home, when I reach to my house, by that time they caught me. Right there. They tie me up with my hands to the back. They have one of them handle a long knife and the other one handle a hammer. So they lead me to the farm far away that no people stay there. And when we reach to the place. They released the rope on my hand and they give me...I don't know what you call that stuff...that stuff that for dig the grounds...

JD: They gave you a shovel?

HN: Shovel, yes that stuff there. They gave me to dig the ground, a hole. So, they do that for the people that they execute. But that's nice enough that they let you do that, even though they just kill you, hit you there, leave you there. So it's nice enough that you dig the hole in the ground for yourself. So I dig it for myself. I'm crying by that time, because I know that the end for my life. I dig it, I'm crying. And after they think the hole is big enough they can put me in there, they tell me, "Alright. Fine. Stop it." And they tie me back. So right there I see one soldier have an M-16 with him, and the other had an A-K with him. Two of the people is not a soldier, he's a group leader that the Khmer Rouge assigned him to watch the people working in the farm. One of them handled a long knife, the other one handled a hammer, as I say. After I dig that, they tell me that is enough let me stand in front of that hole and they kick me from behind, they put me on the knee. So when I'm on the knee they ask me by the time I put my name, Chaophan Raksmeay - that's my real name, my father gave it to me when I birthed. Chaophan is my father's name, Raksmeay is my name. I took my father's first name and last name to be my last name. And then my first name is Raksmeay. And then they ask me, "Can you tell me who you are?" I am a student, but I don't have too much educated. I live in the temple with the monk. My father is poor, he working as a taxi driver to get the money. My mother open a little grocery to feed the kid. They don't believe me, because they know real well from what I told them the first time they asked to put a resume for them. So when I told them that I am lying, then they kick me into the hole. It was real hard, I just getting pain and I cannot see things. They kick real hard on my legs. So I just fall into the hole and they grab my head and they drag me up out of the hole again. And they ask me, "Can you tell me again one more time who you are and what your family's background is?" I continue to tell them the same thing again, because I don't want to change my words. I try to handle it, I just know that whatsoever, I keep the same word I told them, maybe I can have a chance. If I change it back and forth...many people do that, I know that many people was killed. And I know a lot of story that people killed. So I assume that I die if I change even one word that I say. So I tell them the same word again, and they knock me with that thing that I dig the ground. They hit me with that stuff on my head. One more time I fall in there again, and I start having blood bleeding from my head. I know I was bleeding but my tie was tied up. My hands was tied up. And then I in there I really go black. I can't see things. My eyes just blur, and they drag me from the hole again. They ask me, "Can you tell me the truth? That your father is a soldier, right?" All these people know pretty well who I am. "And you are a student in college, that you are going to go to the university in 1975. You have two years educated in France, is it correct?" I told them all of those stuff, actually. And then I didn't answer, I didn't answer. I know that they got the right point. They got everything correct. They have real information about myself.

Though I didn't say nothing. I just kept quiet and bleeding and my chest was bleeding. And my leg was bleeding. Even now, my chest feel pain sometimes. When I breathe, sometimes, it's like a needle is in my chest. I don't know what's wrong with it. Then I didn't say anything. I keep quiet and they knock me down. So this time they just try to knock me to finish me. And then I don't know what's going on. Just one thing hit my head really hard, and then I don't know anything. I unconscious. So I in the hole, I in the hole. The cold soil on my body and then maybe they left. That's what it is. Then at nighttime, it is raining and come down, they cover me with not enough soil. With very thin soil on my body. So when the rain come down, I feel, I revive myself. And then I know, I look all around me it's quiet. It's nothing. Tree and just the wind blows there and the quiet night, and I know that I'm not dead yet. So I decide to run. But I don't know where to run, either. As we are town people, and we don't know the territory in the jungle. So where I'm run, I run to my sister's house. I run to where's my mother is. I run there, I stay there overnight. I get to my sister at nighttime. And my sister ask me, "Brother, what are you doing here? Look at yourself blood." I say, "Sister, I am so tired. I cannot go anywhere. I want to sleep. I just want to have a place to sleep. I want to sleep." And then my sister, she don't know what to do. Then she put me in the house. She got all the dirty clothes and the whatever dirty thing that we throwaway at the corner of the wall. She get all those, cover me at the corner of the wall. She let me sleep in there. Dirty clothes, all those trash put on me at the corner of the house, so nobody can see me. But I am in that trash and dirty clothes. So I sleep there overnight. So in the morning I see my brother, sister, the rest of my brothers and sisters there. I don't see my mother. And then my sister told me that mother was killed, before you came. They took my mother with one of my sisters, she's about six years old. When they got my mother, my six year old sister tried to run after her. She crying and run after her very long, it's about one mile that she run after her. And those soldiers just pick her up, let her go with my mother. So in Khmer Rouge, if they kill your mother, you cry, they kill you also. If you run after her, you try to protect her. Fine. They get you with her, and you both executed. So they execute my little sister who run after my mother. And my sisters told me that mother was killed before you came, a few days. And I see all my little brothers, one is like five years old and the other one is like four. They just sit on the stair of the house and starving to death. No one knows how to do anything. We are just like a little, just like a little kid that don't even know where the mother is. And usually mother fix thing for all those little brothers and sisters eat. But now she's gone and my older sister also go to work. And all my younger sister and brother sit there and starve there. I can see through the trash and dirty clothes that cover me, but I don't know what to do. Because I know if I get out there, they saw me, they will catch me and kill me again. So all I need, I just need rest, so when I gain up my energy, I will run. I will run anywhere that I can.

JD: And then what did you do?

HN: Then the night come up again and my sister say, "Brother, I think you should run. You run as far as you can. Now you have only one choice. You run, maybe you survive. If you don't run, you stay here. You dead." And I say, "Yes. You right. I got to go, but I don't have clothes." Before they kill me they take all my clothes, they just leave me underwear. So my sister get me old clothes to put on, and she gave me dry rice. We are,

at that time, people really know how to eat by instinct. How to save thing a lot. Even if they ain't got enough, we still try to keep some of it for tomorrow. We not sure they gonna give us the food tomorrow. So we continue to keep it that way all the time. But my sister give me the little rice that she have. It's about a can of rice, dry rice that she give. Dry rice we can survive by in our mouth, chew it and swallow it. You don't cook, you just dry it under the sun. So she gave me about a can of it, and she said, "This is all I have. You take it, and you run." So I take that rice and run.

JD: Henry, I want you to talk briefly about how you got to Thailand.

(technical problems; new tape)

JD: When your sister told you to run and she gave you her last rice and some clothes, what did you do?

HN: Then I run at the night. I run at night just like I assume my two brothers was killed, I run toward west. That's Thailand. The only thing I know. I start to run west, but I'm not running in the jungle this time. I run on the road, on the street. I try to write down because Khmer Rouge, many of Khmer Rouge, 98% of Khmer Rouge who is a guard on the street don't read. They don't read. Those people is acting tough but they don't read. So if I show them a letter that I wrote, some of them they look upside down, some of them look the right way, but I know they don't read it. And then they just do it that way to be pesky and they give it back to me, let me go. But they ask you where you're going to. But I just say I'm going from this place to that place, the close one. So if I go to that place, I hiding myself in somewhere no people can see me and I write another letter to go to another place. I doing that along the way. But fortunately I'm trying to go down to Tonle Sap, but when I reach that town they call, they call...what' s that place? I seem to forget that place...they catch me again. One of the soldiers know me. They catch me again that time. They catch me one more time they say, "This guy I know him." When they catch me, they put me in the execution jail. And they take off all my clothes again, the second time. They tie up my hand, they take off my clothes, they put me in one room. It's not too big, but enough for me to move around. In that room I saw a knife, hammer, like a big ball stick. I saw all those things that they use to execute people. They put me in there. And I saw one jar, big jar that's in there smelling of blood in that jar. So, Khmer Rouge actually execute people by cutting their throat, or knocking them down with like a baseball stick. All those stuff they do. So I see that jar with the blood, and on the wall the blood. And the floor has blood and it's not really clean. So they put me there and I know that they're going to execute me again that night. So by the time the caught me it's about 4:30, it's time for them to go to dinner. So they just keep me in there and then they go to dinner. I'm crying in that room. I'm praying for my mother and father to help me. I'm crying and I ask for them to help me, ask for their spirit to help me, ask for god to help me. Then they walk by and they say, "Hey kid. Shut up and quiet. You want me to do it right now?" They say that way to me, so I shut up. I'm not crying, not yelling no more. So then they go down to eat dinner. When they go to eat dinner, the rope that they tie me, it kind of loose so I can move. I move all over the room. First they tie me to the window, but it's loose from the window so I can move all over the room. Then I get the knife in the

room and I cut the rope behind me. Then I look at, they have two door, one door is a front door another door is in the back door of the room. I look at the front door and I know that I cannot get out the front door here they eating dinner there. So I go to the back door, I see people work there outside. So the people they not soon to execute them, they think that these people just need a little reform, a little work to behave themselves, then they can work. But the people they think these people cannot keep it, so they lock you and at nighttime they kill you. Then I opened that back door, opened the back door out with those people working. Then I start something working with those people. So I'm a worker there too. Nobody can recognize anybody. These people are moving a lot everyday, changing. And people that's gone, nobody know. So we not recognize no other. We just try to work, and the people just try to survive whatever they can. They not pay attention are you a new-comer, why you are here, they don't ask you those questions anymore. When I get out with those people, I just cut the grass a couple knives and I say, "Oh, I feel I have stomachache." I just try to give that express to the people around me, let them hear. "Oh I have a stomachache; I want to get in that jungle there so I may come back later." Then I get in there, I'm gone. It's lucky for me the second time. And the Khmer Rouge who later in 1979, Vietnamese force in, I go back. The people who knew me they say, "Khmer Rouge really scared of you. They thought you have a magic. They kill you twice, they try to kill you twice, you never die. They thought you have a magic and they're afraid you come back retaliate to their family. They got a guard at nighttime to guard their family." And I say, "Oh God." This is just kind of miraculous. This is just that God and my mother's spirit helped me. I don't have anythings. I tell my friends that way. So I run there. I go to Thailand. I run to territory. First I in Territory Four, I run to Territory Two, I run to Territory Three. Each time I run to territory, I change my name all the way. I change my name from Chaophan Raksmei, then I change my name to Vong Virak, I change to Vong Vichet and rechange to Samneth Vandy the name I came to the United State. Then I change to Henry Nelson when I became a citizen.

JD: What year was it when you got to Thailand?

HN: I get to Thailand in 1979, the day that the Vietnamese forced in. When Vietnamese forced in, I almost get to the border Thailand already. I run that long, I run from staying in one place a couple month, I run to another place. Then I heard they following try to look for me. Then I run from that place again. Then I heard they looking for me again, because I change the name, so they asking for the name that I used to use that they know. So when I heard they ask for my name, I run to another territory again. By 1979, when the Vietnamese force in Cambodia, I close to Thailand already. So when they fight in the city, I saw the explosion of ammunition. I saw the Khmer Rouge soldiers run into the jungle. The Vietnamese fight very strong, they cannot fight against the Vietnamese don't know why, but the Khmer Rouge have a strong force too. But this time they lose. I don't know what's happened. Then they run into the jungle and they try to rally the people with them too. They try to force the people to go with them. They come in and say now the Vietnamese in. Cambodia and Vietnam have a history of killing each other, centuries and centuries ago. We cut throat each other, we cut stomach each other. So Khmer Rouge pick all those point to tell the people, "You gotta go with me even though Vietnamese gonna kill you."

But by this time, people really pissed off with Khmer Rouge. They don't care what Vietnamese gonna do anymore. So Khmer Rouge try to force them in, they try to get away from Khmer Rouge, run to Vietnamese. And I speak Vietnamese by that time. My mother was Chinese-Vietnamese. So I not afraid of Vietnamese, I know I speak Vietnamese. So at least I better. If I go to Khmer Rouge, they will kill me later when they find out. So I decide to run toward the Vietnamese. So I run to Vietnamese, I with Vietnamese, Vietnamese help me to give me food, give me clothes. Give me all those to eat. Then they ask me, "You know people?" I say, "I still know a lot of people's back there." Then I get Vietnamese troop to go with me there to get the people out.

JD: Where did you encounter the Vietnamese?

HN: Encountered Vietnamese at the Phnom Tepadai. It's border Thailand already. But it's just a mountain that kept our border to be apart. But if you climb up to the mountain and go to the other side, it's Thailand already.

JD: And then where did you go with the Vietnamese?

HN: I go with the Vietnamese to that mountain, because a lot of people is there who blocked by Khmer Rouge. Don't let the people run to Vietnamese. If the people try to run out, he shoot. So I tell the Vietnamese, "Go there. Help those people. Those people really want to come back here." Then I go with the Vietnamese force. Then they fight with the Khmer Rouge by that time. While they fight each other, then the people just run from another way. So the Khmer Rouge get busy with fighting, then the people have a chance to run. Some of them die, because of shooting.

JD: And then what did you do then?

HN: Then I work for Vietnamese for a while. About one or two month I work for Vietnamese. They get me to a town and I working for the state. Battambang state, they get me there to interpreter. I speak Vietnamese so I try to convince people to believe in the new government of Hun Sen now that backed up by the Vietnamese. So I convince them to trust the new government, to come back and join with the new world government-they not like Khmer Rouge. But for a while, I live with them for like two months, then I see the flag. Again, I see the red flag, I'm really scared. Because Khmer Rouge use a red flag with hammer and all those stuff on the flag. Then I see Vietnamese come in with the new government of Cambodia using the same flag again. Just a little different but red blocks there and it have also the knives and all those stuff on the flag. I say, "Oh God. Again." Then I decide not to stay with them. I run to Thailand.

JD: What happened in Thailand?

HN: I run across jungles; across jungles that have mines there along the borders. Khmer Rouge put the mines to prevent people from running out to Thailand. Many people died in jungles. Many of them I saw the bones there, the skeletons there in the jungle there. So by that time many of mine have been exploded, so we have a certain way to walk. But

just walk on that little path, don't get out of that path. So I run to Thailand with everybody. A lot of people run by that time who don't trust the new government either because they know that new government name is communist also.

JD: Then what did you do in Thailand?

HN: I run to Thailand. I live along the border camp. The first in 1979 a couple month after Vietnamese force in I run to Thailand. Then it was kind of like bad luck to me and many other thousands of Cambodians who are sent back to Dang Rak mountain. I don't know if you know about this or not, but by that time, Thailand government send the people back by Dang Rak mountain. They let them go down. I go around. That route, hundreds of people died too. Step on the mine field. Then I still continue to come back again. Long way. Then the second time I reach to Thailand border camp and I see the Red Cross. I see humanitarian, Red Cross, many organizations there along the border camp. Come to work in the camp and they build the Khao I Dang camp. And they say the refugees who willing to go to Khao I Dang camp, you have a chance to go to a third country. So we count, Cambodia is the first country, Thailand is second country, and abroad. French and America, England or whatsoever, it's a third country. So people that go to that camp you will have a chance to go to the third country. Then I decide to go. By that time I have no one. I am alone. I lost my brothers, sisters, I lost all that I have. I have no information from them. So I decide to get to go to camp.

JD: How long did you stay in that camp?

HN: I stay in Khao I Dang camp about two years. But because I have a high background of educations, I help the immigration, I help two immigration officer. I help the American immigration officer as an interpreter, and I help the French immigration as interpreter. The reason I help them because I need to build up a good volunteer background or history of my volunteer in order to have them help me go to a third country. Because people who go to third country, most of them have a sponsor and I knew nobody in a third country. I work with them for about [missing number] years then I ask the American immigration to help me get a sponsor for me. Then they get Catholic Relief Service to sponsor me to United States.

JD: And The Catholic Relief Service sponsored you to come to the United States?

HN: Yeah.

JD: In what year?

HN: In 1982.

JD: And where did you come in the United States?

HN: At first I came to Ohio. I get down in Ohio. Cleveland. I get down and it's amazing. I get down in the year in February and it's really...the ground is white snow all over. It's

freezing. I cannot want to stay here. Then I ask a gentlemen, who's taking care of me, he work for World Relief Service. I ask him, anywhere that have a warm weather. That's nicer than this. I want to go there. Then he told me California it's very nice weather. But I stay there a week and I say I'm sorry I cannot stay here. So I decide to go to California. And I fly to California.

JD: And then how long did you stay in California?

HN: I get to California and I go to college there. I met some friends; Cambodian people I make friends with them and they told me, "Do this, do that in order to get up your life." And I go to Long Beach City College there daytime and I work at nighttime part-time to support myself. And later on I really need sort of a financial living. Then I decide to go to school only part-time and I work full-time at the McDonald's. And I become a chef's manager there in six months.

JD: What brought you to Minnesota?

HN: The reason that brought me to Minnesota because I found one of my sister.

JD: How did you find your sister?

HN: The World Relief informed me. They say, "One of the lady saying claim that you are her brother. Do you know this lady here? Her name is Chaophan Nary and you are Samreth Vandy. It's completely different." But when I heard that name I know that's my father's name. She is my sister for sure. Then I contact the World Relief that I want to have a photo. Later on they send me a photo and I say, "That's my sister!" That's my first sister, the oldest one. But I am her brother, older brother. Then I call her and we actually brother and sister. That's why it get me here.

JD: And she relocated in Minnesota?

HN: Yes. She located in Minnesota here.

JD: So you came to be with her?

HN: Yes.

JD: What do you do now?

HN: Now I work with the Refugee and Immigrant Resource Center and also I work for Legal...Southeast-Asian Legal Education and Assistance Project. Also I do a volunteer job to help Creative Living Center to help Cambodian children study Cambodian language, and to help I stand as Chairman of Community Mutual Assistance to help the refugees who are not English speakers.

JD: What do you know of the rest of your family?

HN: I know that I still have two other...one other brother and sister in the camp along the border. Now they are married and have kid and I try to sponsor them here. I sent them a letter also some money. So I found two more now. I am very happy to find them.

JD: What does your sister do here?

HN: She work as a waitress in the restaurant.

JD: What do you hope to do in the future?

HN: My intention are trying to help the people who came to America here to understand why it...how this country develop and how we gonna set our life here. I help them to be self sufficient here and generate themselves the way the people here is. But it go slow because they not educated people. Ninety-nine percent of them are not educated at all. And it's very hard to help them, but I'm still trying the best I can because I know what pain we have. I have a lot of pain and I don't want to see them go the same way. I try to convince them to be...to understand that the future of all of us, no one can control it. We all control our future ourselves. We better be watching good in order to get someone to be our leader or whatsoever. We made a mistake back there. That's why we lost our country.

JD: What mistake was made back there?

HN: We trust one person. We give them all the powers. Whatever they do, we never verify it. That the way our system is. The person who elected for the president or king, we never watching what they're doing. We make them lead the country. And just like we give them to lead our future.

JD: Like for instance Lon Nol?

HN: Just like Lon Nol or just like Prince Norodom Sihanouk. We never verify what they're doing.

JD: And that gave an opportunity for the Khmer Rouge.

HN: That gave opportunity for Khmer Rouge. Sihanouk lost his chair in 1970. Lon Nol made coup d'état by that time. And the revolution by that time change the country from royal regimes to republican regimes that Lon Nol deal with America here. So Sihanouk got made with all that stuff he want his chairs back, so he dealing with the Khmer Rouge. He dealing with China, and China is supporting him, and he's dealing with the Khmer Rouge. And he try to deal with Khmer Rouge. Thousands and thousands of Khmer Rouge with him to fight with Lon Nol. And he really convinced because Cambodians people, most of them is poor. So when Lon Nol become the president, the corruption, it become tripled. And that made the people angry. And that gave a chance to the prince convince the people to join him. To get his power, to get hiss fighting for his chairs back. But when

the Khmer Rouge win, Khmer Rouge also betray on him. Khmer Rouge won't let him sit on that chairs. They sit by themselves.

JD: What inspired the Khmer Rouge? What made them do those unspeakable crimes against their own people?

HN: This is in some document when we get out, when in 1979 Vietnamese force in. Some the document that they found, as I work for the state as interpreters there, we found some document that they dealing with China that they try to eliminate the Cambodians people. And I don't really understand how crazy he is, but no wonders. Pol Pot, he's not Cambodians. He's a China. He's a China half-blood with Cambodians and I don't know what they're dealing with that story. So they try to eliminate all the Cambodians, and the most of them that they eliminate, they eliminate the mans. And they keep the woman. So, I don't know what they're planning for, keep the woman and kill all the man.

JD: The men, the Khmer Rouge that took away your father, how old were they?

HN: Pardon me?

JD: The Khmer Rouge, the soldiers that came and took away your father, how old were they?

HN: Khmer Rouge really brainwashed the kid. The soldiers were eleven years old, nine years old, ten years old. That don't even...can't carry the gun from the ground. And those kid get really brave to kill people. Like they want to kill adult, they put a stair to climb up and hit the head. The Khmer Rouge train those kid very good, and they brainwashed those kid. And those kid have no educate. They train them since they young and they give them enough food to eat. So they trust "anka", they love "anka". Their father not even have enough food for them to eat, took the kid away to reform the kid, they brainwash the kid. The kid come back home and not even listen to their parent. Kid can also spy, can be a spy on their parents. By that time people are starving. People stealing all over the country, we steal everything. I am also stealing stuff, honestly. I honor today because I just want to stress to everybody in the world to know that the Cambodian people is the wisdom of the past. So we are really...don't trust others, by that time. You don't trust me, I don't trust you. Husband and wife don't even trust each other. And parent and kid not even trust each other. Kid come back home, see the parents have rice to eat, they go back to "anka", they give the information to "anka". Because no one have a right to eat rice. So if you have rice to eat that mean you stealing something. So when you have wheat to eat, that mean you stealing something. So then they go back to "anka", they give that information to "anka," "anka" come back to get the parents to the meeting. Then they accuse the parent is not obey "anka". The parent is bad people and they let that kid kill their parents. The kid did it. But when the kid kill the parents, they say...told the people in the meeting, "They not kill the parents. They kill the enemy of the 'anka'." They did.

JD: What do you hope for Cambodia's future?

HN: I think that if the Cambodians still let Khmer Rouge to be part of the government in Cambodia, one day the same thing will come back again and the people of the country this time are going to be completely destroyed. Because Khmer Rouge now understand that the people don't like him. And really when he can go back to power again, he will just wash it one time, that's it. He not going to be slow like before no more. Before he do it pretty slow, make people die. Die of starving, die by working on the field, do something for him and you die is fine. But this time he's not going to keep that chance, because he know if he let people have a chance when he come to power again, just let people have a chance for about a month or two, those people will stand up and fight back at him. So he do it as quick as he can if he come back to the power again.

JD: In closing, Mr. Nelson, what message would you most like people to understand most about the experience that you and your family and fellow Cambodians went through?

HN: I would like the people to understand and realize that, just like I say, we have to help each other and be brave to stand up and correct the leaders. But our country, I don't believe people have that chance. Here, in America, you saying that's fine, but back in Cambodia you say that, at night you gone. And I think that Cambodians feel the same way. Even right now, even right now, many friends going back to Cambodia came back here they say the corruption is multiplied ten times now. People selling school, they're selling temple, selling everything to get the money. And I don't know what in fact they're trying to do. They're really trying to destroy the country again. And when they're doing that, that make the Khmer Rouge popular again. The Khmer Rouge gonna take that point and convince the people to be on their side. And people will, people will, because seventy-five percent of Cambodian is poor. Seventy-five of the population is poor. The farmers. So the poor farmers really hate the corruptions. So when the corruptions happen, the farmers willing to sacrifice their life to fight to get their freedom. But they was cheated by the Khmer Rouge. They fight for freedom, but when they win, Khmer Rouge hold all the power and that's how the Khmer Rouge gonna doing those stuff again. See, that just going that the people go without thinking, but they gonna do what they tell them to do.

JD: Is there any friend you made in the camps, or in the working camps, under the Khmer Rouge that you'd like to see again?

HN: No. If I see them, I don't think I can handle myself to be calm enough. I really recognize the person who kill my mother. The person who kill my father I am really not quite remembering, but the person who take my mother away-I remember him very well. By the time they Khmer Rouge force in...by the time the Vietnamese force in, I work for the state as interpreter. I have a gun. I have an AK gun- Vietnamese. I go back to the same place where my mother live and I go to look for that person, but that person run into the jungle with the Khmer Rouge. By that time, if I found him, I don't know what I'm gonna do with him. But I'm definitely going back to look for him. See, this-I just like to let you know that this-is what make the Cambodian people very, a very weak society that can be break down pretty easy. So, we really don't have a trust, to build a trust we have to have patience. And it really hard to build a trust with them. Even here with the police

department, with the medical source office, they don't trust all those. We don't trust police officer, because of what the past experience is. The only thing that this is, I don't trust him. I don't think he gonna give me the right and freedom and those stuff. And also the system in this country the completely opposite from what they are. The culture, the system, all that stuff is completely different. So everything they create here, everything they've done here is a conflict with the system in America. That make them become, God they don't give me all these freedom. Like they hit their kid. They beat their kid. Police come to get them. They say the police won't give them a freedom to behave their kid.

JD: Okay. Mr. Nelson I want to thank you very much for being with us this evening.

HN: You're welcome. I'm glad you let me have this opportunity.

JD: There's something more you wanted the people to understand. There's something that made you sorry about the Cambodian experience. What was that?

HN: My point of view, I was so sorry for the world, as I know so far. Since I been here in 1982, I been in America, I try to tell this story to many Americans. And many other Cambodians who'd been here before me, since 1975 they had not lived with the Khmer Rouge. When the country collapsed, they have a good chance to get out, then they came to the United State. They not live back there. I told all those people the story what happened in Cambodia. People were executed, their baby was even killed. And if your family, if your father was a soldier, they not just kill your father they kill your whole family, even the baby. Because the Khmer Rouge have this idea, a proverb that is saying that if you digging a tree, dig the whole root. Don't let any roots stay there, it may grow up again. So they kill one member of the family, they kill all of them. They have to do that. Worrying from retaliation later that the kid growing up. Nobody believe me. Even in America I tell Cambodians was executed-million and million of them. They say they don't believe it. They say it's crazy. No one doing such stuff. So no one believe me and I'm really frustrated and I'm really angry with the people that I told and don't believe me the story. Just recently, I feel happy because the world starting to believe that the Cambodian under the Khmer Rouge genocide regime really destroy the country to the point zero and killed manys, manys of people. Almost completely destroyed the country. And I very relieved when they believe it. And I go to watch the film, The Killing Field, that Hollywood made it. And I just feel so sorry that the film not even cover a part of it. It very, cover very little situations in there. Actually, the true story is a lot more than that. I don't know why they didn't do the whole thing of what is happened. Maybe they don't want to show too much of what, I don't know. That film is nothing yet to me. It's only painful if I just believe that if I create my own movie, I gonna to show the world what's really happened there.

JD: Is there anything in your daily life now that reminds you of the old days?

HN: Yes, yes. It still haunt me. The memories still haunt me. When I sleep at night, sometimes I dream about a meeting with the Khmer Rouge. I was punished by the Khmer Rouge, and then I struggle a lot in my dream. And then I wake up I get wet. I then I

just...and after that I know that I'm on the bed in America, so I feel better so I sleep back. It really haunted me a lot.

JD: You mentioned the word, the use of the word "meeting" brings back memories of meetings you used to have to attend. Are there any other words or phrases or events that bring back memories?

HN: The word "meeting" is bad for the Cambodian people. And every time I work with a refugee at the resource center, when I gathering the elderly together to the meeting to give them education on the culture, American cultures, give them a speaker at the meeting. I really convince them a lot before I get them in. I tell them using another words, I not using the "meeting". I'm using the word that invite them to "discussions". A live activity, and what we can cooperate together to make our community strong and better. Understand each other. I use all those sentences. I don't use the word "meeting". And also the word "co-op" is pretty pissed off with the Cambodian people. Khmer Rouge use the word "co-op". They create many co-op the whole country. Co-op Number One, Co-op Number Two through Co-op number hundred of them. And each co-op had one hundred families. And in the co-op they divide in thirty in one little small co-op's in there. So thirty family, thirty family, thirty family. A hundred, in that one hundred. Where I live, I have thirty families with me in one place that I live. Only two man survive when Vietnamese force in; me and another guy. But we both stealing a lot. We stealing stuff to eat. We stealing anything that we need to stay alive. I met him and of the thirty family, two are still alive. We meet each other and just embrace each other and we trying to do the best we can to join. I don't know where he is now, still alive.

JD: Did you know him before the Khmer Rouge came to power?

HN: I don't know him before the Khmer Rouge. I know him by the time Khmer Rouge classify us in group, then I know him in group of thirty families there. So I knew him, we work in the farm together, all the people work in the farm together. Started starving. All those stuff the Khmer Rouge did to the people. Those people just pass away, some, many of them executed.

JD: What is the hardest thing for you arriving Cambodian people to adjust to about this country?

HN: They never adjust to this country. I just let you know, they never adjust to this country. Just make them look better. Maybe another two or three generations they may adjust their lives to this country. But with this generation, I don't think so. They have a difficulty of learning language. They don't use to the systems here. Many of my friend who been here is have a problem with the legal actions here. Because they beat their wife, they beat their kids. That the way the our cultures is. It's cultural involvement. In our country the man responsible for the family, the man have a powers. The man is the driver in the family. He can drive whatever he want. The wife never say a word. Have to obey all the time. Just like here many men involved with abuse. And then also the kid. We behave the kid, we beat them. Because the Cambodian cultures, the kids get out the

parents because the parents give them a hard time. Then they scared. And here, you see many Asian kids doing a lot of things. Like here about a month ago they shoot the clerk in the gas station or supermarket store and the kid become a gangster. The kid stealing stuff. Because the system here. I believe the elderly people, they blame the American system. They say their family structure, and their kids not obey them. Everything destroyed about the family structure that they have, because of American system. That's what they say. And many of them would like to meet with the judge to tell what judge should do, and what the system should do to make the Asian kid become straight and honest. So won't create the problems.

JD: Well, our time is about up here, Mr. Nelson. Is there anything else you want to tell us?

HN: I think it's pretty much that I told you at this time.

JD: Ok. Thank you very much.

HN: You're welcome.

Khmer Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society