

Several pages of the original transcription of the Testimony of Sok Yorm and Phorm Phuong have been corrected. They were corrected on 3/14/02 by Beatriz Meunteau, at the University of Minnesota Law School. The corrected pages are the following: 1; 5; 6; 8; 9; 11; 14; 16.

TESTIMONY OF SOKYORM AND PHORM PHRONG, on July 31, 1992, at the Cable Access Studio, St. Paul, Minnesota. The testimony of Sok Yorm and Phorm Phuong was interpreted by Mr. Sothea Phea Poch. The examination was conducted by Mr. Al Zdrazil.

MR. ZDRAZIL: It's July 31st, 1992. We are at the St. Paul Cable Access Studio. This is the taping of the Khmer Archive Project, by the Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee. My name is Al Zdrazil. The interpreter is Sothea Phea Poch. Our narrators are Mrs. Phorm Phuong and Mr. Sok Yorm.

VIDEO OPERATOR: You can start asking questions.

AZ: I introduced all of you in my very poor accent. Could all of you introduce yourselves again, please?

THE INTERPRETER: Start with me?

AZ: Yes.

THE INTERPRETER: My name is Sothea Phea Poch and I am interpreter for today.

PHORM PHRONG: My name is Phorm Phuong

SOK YORM: My name is Sok Yorm.

AZ: Can you tell us where you were born?

PP/SY: Battambang.

AZ: Did you know each other as children?

PP/SY: State the question again.

AZ: Did you know each other as children?

PP/SY: Yes, we do.

AZ: Where is Battambang?

PP/SY: Battambang is [in] northwest of Cambodia.

AZ: How large of a town or village was it?

PP/SY: The village consists about 300 house.

AZ: What were their occupations or what was their employment before the Khmer Rouge came to their part of Cambodia? What were they doing for employment before they came?

PP/SY: Before the Khmer Rouge?

AZ: Before the Khmer Rouge.

PP/SY: Before the Khmer Rouge took over, I was a farmer.

AZ: What about Phorm Phrong?

PP/SY: Before the Khmer Rouge took over, I was also a farmer.

AZ: When the Khmer Rouge took over, did they have any children?

PP/SY: Yes. We do have some children.

AZ: How old were your children? What was their sex?

PP/SY: My daughter was 12-years-old and my son was 11-years-old.

AZ: When did the Khmer Rouge first come to their village?

PP/SY: In 1975 the Khmer Rouge come to my village.

AZ: What was the first thing the Khmer Rouge did when they came into the village? What was the first thing they changed?

PP/SY: First when the Khmer Rouge came, they didn't change anything.

AZ: After the first couple of months, what happened where there was a change?

PP/SY: After a couple three months when they came, then they divided people into group and forced people to share food together.

AZ: Were they allowed to continue to live in their house at that point or did they have to go live someplace else?

PP/SY: Also they divided people into group. Then they force people from their own homes.

AZ: Did they still stay in the village or did they have to go to another village?

PP/SY: At first everyone still staying in the same village, but then later on they were divided into group and forced to go to different place.

AZ: What happened to their property?

PP/SY: All my property were confiscate by the Khmer Rouge government.

AZ: Were they allowed to keep any personal property such as photographs or family possessions or anything like that?

PP/SY: No. At that time I was not allowed to keep any personal belonging, not even a photo.

AZ: Were the two of them kept together or were they put into separate groups?

PP/SY: No. I was forced to separate from my wife and my wife was put in different group and different place.

AZ: What happened to their children?

PP/SY: My children was put into a children's center and work in the field.

AZ: Were they ever allowed to see their children?

PP/SY: No. They would let me see my children once a year.

AZ: What sort of work did each of them do when they were in their separate groups?

PP/SY: For my job they gave me to do on the farm is to plow the farm and take care of the cattle and digging the canal and do other things than that.

AZ: How many men were there in his group?

PP/SY: In my group was ten people and there were three group, 21 so 30 people, and we live a distance from each other; about 100 feet from each other.

AZ: What about Phorm Phrong?

PP/SY: I was forced to work also in the field planting rice, to carry heavy bundle of rice and working in the rains. Very hot.

AZ: Did the two of you ever see each other?

PP/SY: No, only when I asked permission to see my husband, but the permission would allow me to see only a night or so only. Never permission that I could see each other, example, for two or three days. There was never such permission like that.

AZ: Did the Khmer Rouge ever make you go to classes to learn doctrine or to learn about their government or their new way of doing things?

PP/SY: There was no class in term of putting me in a classroom study of the government system. However, they have a meeting conducted by the Khmer government. In the meeting they always told me to work hard, not to be lazy, to try to do everything that I was told to do.

AZ: How often would you have to go to a meeting like that?

PP/SY: It depends on the certain time. When the time is really important for them, they would conduct the meeting once a week, but if they think it's not really important to conduct the meeting, they conduct the meeting once a month. How long would they have to work out in the field in terms of the day; how much of the day would they have to be out there? There is no time to rest. It's only when time to sleep. That's all. Just keep working.

AZ: How many days a week would they have to work out in the field?

PP/SY: For three years and eight months there is no holiday. It is for seven days a week of work.

AZ: What would happen if somebody would get sick so that they couldn't go to work?

PP/SY: There is a certain procedure that the Khmer Rouge would observe or investigate if a person claiming that he or she gets sick. They would look at it; how sick will the person be. Otherwise, if they see that the person is sick, they would - - the medicine that they give the person is only coconut water and they inject into the person. Otherwise, the person would keep working until he fell down and is unable to continue.

AZ: What would happen if he fell down and was unable to continue?

PP/SY: The government seemed not to care about it if a person fell down or lay down. They would just bring them to the house and give them some medicine. If they live, they live. If they die, they die.

AZ: What sort of food were they given during this three-year, eight-month period?

PP/SY: The food they give us to - - me to eat, there is no meat. There is no other food other than salt and a can of rice for ten people and therefore we need to mix some other vegetables in order to get more food to eat.

AZ: Can you show us how big the can would be with your hands?

PP/SY: The can's about this big. It's about this tall (indicating).

AZ: There was one per day?

PP/SY: For one time, like for a one-meal time. In other words, it's one can for lunch and another can for dinner.

AZ: What would happen to somebody if they told the Khmer Rouge that they didn't like what they were doing or spoke disrespectfully to them?

PP/SY: That person would be killed.

AZ: Would that be done secretly or would other people be made to watch it?

PP/SY: The Khmer Rouge would come, take the person from the group and then tell the group not to behave or to act such the act that the people did. Otherwise, people would be killed the same and then they took people away.

AZ: When they would take people away, did you ever see them again or did you ever have to go and help bury the body or was that just the last you saw of them?

PP/SY: No. I never seen the person come back.

AZ: Mr. Yorm, when we talked before, you talked about the thing that stood out most in your mind about the Khmer Rouge. Could you tell us about that again?

PP/SY: At this point I don't know how to begin unless you ask the question.

AZ: You told us about how when they came into your village they killed important people to get families to obey them and that you had to bury the bodies. Could you tell us about that?

PP/SY: When the Khmer Rouge come after a couple months, they divided the group and then they gathered all the important person and then they kill them. Then they come to me. They ask me to go and bury the body. They kill these people between two hills and I was really scared because I had never buried people before, buried a body before, and there was an old man to help me bury the three people that were killed.

AZ: Who were the three people? What was their position in the village?

PP/SY: The three people were the pilot that fly the airplane and drop the bomb, killed a lot of people. The Khmer Rouge claim that these were the people that betrayed the nation and killed a lot of the troop.

AZ: Who were the other two?

PP/SY: The Khmer Rouge claimed that the three pilot was a pilot for Lan Nol soldiers and they were captains who were - - who used to be a pilot and flied the plain to drop a lot of bombs. And they also warned villagers not to worry; they killed the right people.

AZ: And Mrs. Phrong, you told us that the thing you remembered most and that bothered you the most about the Khmer Rouge and your life under the Khmer Rouge was the hard work and not having enough food to eat. Could you tell us about that again, please?

PP/SY: During the Pol Pot time I was forced to work in a field, to plant rice and carry bundle of rice, very heavy, and do heavy work and then come home and I was not given enough food to eat.

AZ: How did it happen that you were able to leave where you were working under the Khmer Rouge and eventually leave Cambodia?

PP/SY: During the Khmer Rouge I was unable to escape until the Vietnamese communists took over in 1979.

AZ: Okay. Did the Vietnamese come to where you were living?

PP/SY: Yes, but they don't stay very long. They stay one night and then they continue to the mountain called Krapeur.

AZ: Did they kill the Khmer Rouge or did the Khmer Rouge run away in front of them or what happened to the Khmer Rouge?

PP/SY: The Khmer Rouge run away when they knew that the Vietnamese coming.

AZ: Did the Vietnamese do anything to harm them or did they kill anybody or do anything bad like that?

PP/SY: No.

AZ: Where did they go after the Vietnamese left?

PP/SY: Until the Vietnamese left then I moved to live in Battambang City.

AZ: How long did you live there?

PP/SY: I lived there about six months.

AZ: Did you live there together?

PP/SY: Yeah. We were together.

AZ: What happened to your children; did they join you or were they someplace else?

PP/SY: My children were doing the fighting between the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge. They ran to come back and join with me.

AZ: What did you do for work or to feed yourselves during those months while you were there?

I would go after the Vietnamese to go to the storage that the Khmer used to store rice and get rice to keep it safe for the period that I was there.

AZ: Was there ever any fighting in Battambang?

PP/SY: No. Because the Khmer Rouge -- all the Khmer Rouge run away and then all the Vietnamese stayed.

AZ: Were there any Vietnamese there?

PP/SY: Yes.

AZ: Did they cause them any trouble during that time?

PP/SY: No.

AZ: Why did they leave?

PP/SY: I decided to leave Cambodia because there is no hope for the future. I don't know what's going to happen and I don't know what to do to make a normal living. I don't know what to do.

AZ: When did they leave Cambodia; what year?

PP/SY: I don't remember exact month, but it's in 1979 toward the end.

AZ: Did they have any property that they were able to take with them?

PP/SY: No. I don't have any except one pot of rice and then a set of clothes.

AZ: Where did you go to?

PP/SY: I walked from Battambang province and across the Siem Reap province and to the border.

AZ: How long did it take you?

PP/SY: About 15 days.

AZ: Were both of you together?

PP/SY: Yes.

AZ: Were your children with you?

PP/SY: Mr. Yorm said the older children walking that they would walk and the younger children put on the neck.

AZ: Did any of your children - - or your people from your village come with you?

PP/SY: No. There was no people in the village that come with me, but other people from other village, a lot of people come.

AZ: What was the road like that you were on? Was it a wide road or was it just a trail?

PP/SY: It was just a narrow path and it was all forest, bushes, and I was told that not to step out from the path because there is mine explosive.

AZ: Did they run into any soldiers on the way or any robbers or anybody that caused them trouble?

PP/SY: When I came, no, I didn't run into any robbers or soldiers.

AZ: How did you know when you had crossed the border?

PP/SY: At first I heard the Khmer resistance go inside Cambodia and get people out, say that the international organization will help people with food, but I don't believe them. I believe a lot of people come, I don't know where they go. I just follow them.

AZ: Where did you go?

PP/SY: Then I came to a camp called Rithyden and stayed there overnight and then we came to Khao I Dang.

AZ: How far from the border was the first camp you stayed in?

PP/SY: It took me to walk on that path from the border to the camp, it was about two hours.

AZ: You talked about the Khmer resistance trying to get you to come with them. Where did they want you to go?

PP/SY: I don't remember every detail, but the Khmer resistance wanted people to come to the camp, the first camp, where I was staying overnight. And when the international

organization had the truck come and pick up people to go to Khao I Dang camp, nobody tell us where to go. I just ran and get on the bus.

AZ: Was the Khmer resistance running the first camp then?

PP/SY: Yes.

AZ: Did they have any food there?

PP/SY: I notice that they have food. They just give the food to their own people, but the newcomers, they didn't seem to care about it and I don't know what to do. That's why I decided to go to Khao I Dang.

AZ: Did you take a bus or a truck to Khao I Dang?

PP/SY: There was a high authority that come with the bus and there was a bus, but people came telling me that if you go to the Khao I Dang camp you will be killed and you will be dumped in a place that was not safe but because of there is no food for me, I decided to get on the bus.

AZ: Did you have any difficulty getting all of your family on the bus with you?

PP/SY: Yes. It was difficult because some people tried to protect people from coming to Khao I Dang camp and I just put my children in the bus and then get on the bus myself and leave the camp.

AZ: So they did all come with you?

PP/SY: Yes.

AZ: How long was the ride to Khao I Dang?

PP/SY: At that time I don't know. I don't know how to estimate the time because the road would bend and kind of far.

AZ: Was it more than one day?

PP/SY: About half of the day.

AZ: What did they find when they got to Khao I Dang?

PP/SY: When I get to Khao I Dang, I saw a lot of Americans, saw a hospital. And with the people who were getting ill, they were put into the hospital and for those that were not ill, 11 they were distributed material to build a house, to stay and put into a group and sections to live in a certain section in a group.

AZ: How long did you live in Khao I Dang?

PP/SY: I lived in Khao I Dang for five years.

AZ: During that time, did they ever have a time when there wasn't enough to eat or when they were not given medical attention when they needed it?

PP/SY: At first when I heard the word international organization I don't know what it was, but I saw a lot of Americans and plenty of food and the children were put into day care center.

AZ: Were they ever abused by the guards or the people there?

PP/SY: There was - - people were beaten up by Thai authority, but I don't know whether the people who were beat up by the authority, maybe they not listen or break the rules.

AZ: Did that ever happen to you or members of your family?

PP/SY: No, because my family never get out of camp. People were beaten or killed or shot, only those people decide to get out of the camp.

AZ: Decided to?

PP/SY: To get out of camp.

AZ: Who made arrangements for you to come to the United States?

PP/SY: In the camp, I don't know whether I have any arrangements to come to the United States. I don't recall anybody sponsor me, but one of my relatives, after he accepted, he called my name to come with him. That's the only thing I know.

AZ: Did both of you come together to the United States?

PP/SY: Yeah.

AZ: Were all of your children able to come with you?

PP/SY: Most of my children could come along with me except one of my oldest daughters.

AZ: And she just came here last month?

PP/SY: Yeah. That's right. She just came last month.

AZ: Why did she stay there?

PP/SY: She was married and she had to go with her husband to go back to the camp. That's why we separated.

AZ: Was she still living in Khao I Dang when you left there to come to the United States?

PP/SY: No. When I came to the U.S., she left before that. She left Khao I Dang?

AZ: Did she stay in the camp in Thailand or did she go back to Cambodia?

PP/SY: She stayed in the camp in Thailand?

AZ: When she just came a month ago, did she come from Thailand or from Cambodia?

PP/SY: She just came from Thailand.

AZ: How have you found life to be here in the United States?

PP/SY: For myself, I found it normal because - - I become unable to work. The government support me and I don't feel like I want to be rich or become poor. I don't feel like I am happy or I am sad. I just feel normal.

AZ: I was just going to ask if there are any other things I should talk about. Going back to the Khmer Rouge time for a little bit, did you see any violations against other people by the Khmer Rouge?

PP/SY: One thing I saw is the Khmer Rouge come and take the important people and anybody who used to be a soldier, they would come and take them to kill.

AZ: Is that true for both of you?

PP/SY: Yes. It's true for me, too. I also saw the Khmer Rouge come and take people and tie them up to the back like this and then bring them away.

AZ: Have your children told you what their experience was like under the Khmer Rouge?

PP/SY: Yes. They told me that during that time they was forced to work in the field and sometime in the rain and without not having enough clothes to wear, sometimes their clothes wet. They don't have anything to change. They have to carry heavy bundle of rice and carry dirt.

AZ: How old were your children in 1979?

PP/SY: My daughter was 12 and my son 11 in 1979.

AZ: Have they told you whether or not they saw any of the children killed by the Khmer Rouge or punished by them?

PP/SY: At that time I never heard any complaint from my children and it was told to me at that time if anybody complain they were beaten to death or maybe disappear if they were killed and therefore there is no one else there to complain.

AZ: But since then have they told you about anything like that?

PP/SY: At that time, example, that I was in -- sit together with a couple people and talking and one of the Khmer Rouge observer saw me sitting and a couple people. I was confronted by them. I was told not to do it anymore.

AZ: During the time that you were in the separate groups and you were separated from your children, did you ever see your children?

PP/SY: No. I was not allowed to see my children. Example, if I had food for my children to give it to my children and I had to wait for their permission. I asked permission at least a month or a week ahead of time and by that time, the food that I have probably spoil or wouldn't get to my children. Every time I ask permission they would say you need to work more. You don't go for fun.

AZ: What was it like when you saw your children?

PP/SY: I feel pity for my children when I saw them working hard and doing heavy work, but I can't complain because the Khmer government say that children is not my children anymore. They are the children of Anka and the word 'Anka' mean the high commission or the high organization.

AZ: After the Vietnamese came and you saw your children again, after the Khmer Rouge had left, what condition were your children in?

PP/SY: I feel very sad to saw my children at first. They don't have any clothes to wear and they have only the shorts and their clothes all tear apart.

AZ: What do you miss most about Cambodia right now?

PP/SY: I miss my home town and my relatives who survived and still live in Cambodia.

AZ: Would you like to go back there?

PP/SY: If I have money I would go visit.

AZ: Is there anything else you would like to tell us; whether you would like people to know about yourselves or about your life under the Khmer Rouge?

PP/SY: The condition in the Khmer Rouge is far worse than I could imagine. I feel suffer enough and plus when I come to U.S. I feel even more depressed because I couldn't do

anything, I couldn't work. I depend on my children because of the language barrier, but I don't feel like I want to be rich or become poor. I just want to live in peace.

AZ: Thank you very much.

Khmer Oral History Project
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