

Oral History

Partial transcript of interview with Vera Thong Tith and her husband William An Tith of Lowell, MA. Interview was chiefly with Vera, and unless noted otherwise, all quoted words are hers.

Conducted by Sheila Kirschbaum, TIHC, February 13, 1993

Both born in Cambodia (W in 1950, V in 1952)

1979: Son born in Cambodia after Khmer Rouge left, after Communists left
Were married [8/25/74] before Communist rule

Held off from having children during "hard" Communist-ruled
"generation."

Named son born after Communist rule "Samnang," meaning "lucky"--they
mean this as "very lucky."

"Not enough food to eat, work very hard," during Communist era.

People in camp waited long for agency "call them to the United States."

Daughter born 1983 at Lowell General Hospital. Nurses gave Vera a book to
choose name from. Husband suggested Dy (pron. "Dee," Vera's given
Cambodian name); they named her Deanna.

When V. and W. became citizens, they changed names from Dy to Vera,
from Savoeun to William ("Savoeun" was "hard to call"; Dy would be
pronounced "Die"). William explains that "somebody [at work] tried to
ignore [his Cambodian] name." No bad feelings about changing names.
Vera wants names to be "easy" for others. Says, "My eyes still the same;
my skin still the same. . . . It's no matter. "

Taught in Cambodia 2 years. After escape to Thailand, taught there almost
2 years (taught young children). In Cambodia, taught math, French in
secondary school--"like a private school."

Some language difficulty once in US, but not much, because Cambodians
studied English in school for one hour a week in secondary school; every
other subject was taught in French. Did less and less in Cambodian and
more and more in French as they went on in school. French knowledge
helped with English learning.

Vera completed college*, but had "no proof." Left Cambodia with "empty
hand." "They destroy everything when Communists come through,"
explains William. People were moved from in town to outside the town, to
fields. *[William completed college, too--technology, Phnom Penh.]

Q: Were you considered dangerous (due to education)?

A. They (V. & W.) knew they had to "keep eye on . . . what was going on.
We were quiet."

Wore only black, could only dye clothes black. Boiled bark of tree to make black dye to dye clothes. Wore black like a uniform, to suggest conformity (compliance) with Communist rulers. Vera: "Your mind not follow them" if you don't change to one color. One color, "one spoon of rice every day." (For this interview Vera happens to be wearing a bright gold sweater, William a bright red one.)

The rule still Communist. Vietnamese invade, "have something in their mind, too." Not just there to free people from the Khmer Rouge. Vera says, "I don't like politic[s] at all." One comes, the other leaves; one leaves, the other comes. "Poor Cambodian in the middle" (V.). "Like a game," adds William.

No respect there now for UN. They will kill anyone. Would even fire on a Red Cross truck.

Hard to tell who does vs. who orders killing. Khmer Rouge? Vietnamese? (Vera uses A, B, C to show who kills whom--A may hire B to kill C, for ex.)

"War still around . . . very, very sad."

William: "Vietnamese don't want to get out of my country. I saw by my eyes, they took every single thing from my country to their country." Machines, gold, rice concealed in a military truck by a Vietnamese who claimed the truck contained only the body of a dead soldier.

William was an electrician in 1979 when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia. Vera saw on the news that Vietnam had invaded.

Vietnamese soldiers changed clothes to look "regular," not like soldiers, instead of leaving as they were supposed to have done. They took pains to look like Cambodians. Only their speech gave them away as Vietnamese. They would even speak Cambodian to each other. Real Cambodians weren't fooled.

Vera: "The bottom line: We have to understand each other," all people of all countries. Have to avoid urge to be "more powerful," to have "more money." Vera and her family visited Cambodia during the summer of 1992. Vera says, "My tear cry all the time," explaining how she felt while there. She kept asking herself, "What should I do now?"

Vera then says if there were more Demonstration Schools and no war, people would understand each other (The Demo is a trilingual, tricultural Lowell elementary school where she teaches preschool children).

"United States very good country, seem like control very good. . . . We want to share, too. We don't say we want only Cambodian people in Cambodia.

Any country can join together, but don't make problem." Vera wonders "what should we do" to promote understanding, togetherness.

William: People who get citizenship love the land (US). Cambodian people are like a closed flower (hiding patriotism inside). Ho Chi Minh's book influenced people to take over Cambodia. When John Kerry went to Vietnam, he was shown, by Vietnamese, an unreal scene. ("They so smart," Wm. says of the Vietnamese.)

Q.: Would you ever go back to Cambodia to live?

A.: (Vera) It is "my dream" to go back to Cambodia to live.

(William) "I don't know" if I would. I would go, "in peace."

Vera explains that before 1975, Cambodia was a wonderful, peaceful place. From 1975 to 1979 "everything [was] destroyed" and there is "still not peace."

"Very, very scary" now: accidents, thefts. Hometown is far from capital. Six-hour drive before, eight-to-twelve-hour drive now: holes, road is "broken," bridges unrepaired.

THE TRIP OUT

William: "tough time." Vietnamese inside border, in forests near Thailand border. Had to crawl, watch for mines. Lots of mud. Vietnamese didn't want Cambodians to cross to Thailand.

IN THAILAND CAMP

In 1981, five people (in Vera's family) "have name" to come to US: William, Vera, son, mother-in-law, niece. Mother-in-law, when name called, decided to stay. Wanted to die in Cambodia. But two years later (1983), conditions in camp (theft, little food) caused her to change mind. Two men took sixteen-year-old niece away from her, perhaps "for money." Took her to Cambodian camp. Mother-in-law came to US in 1983 (when granddaughter Deanna was three months old).

William: asked someone to help them see niece last summer--had to pay \$100.00 each way--long, overnight trip. Cannot get niece to US now; she's not a close relative (according to Kathy Flynn, who works with refugees). They just learned they may now be able to sponsor. Vera has one brother, two sisters, one niece, and one nephew still in Cambodia.

[At this point Vera brings out photographs of her uncle, niece, and other relatives they saw in Cambodia last summer. Says, "Sad story, Sheila."] Had celebration. "Very quick one month"--hard to leave and time passed quickly. Relatives touched them, said, "Oh, people from United States," felt their skin. Vera's sister got married shortly after they left. People at airport in Cambodia asked V. and Wm. if they'd seen any of their relatives

in US. "Did you hear this name, that name?" they would ask.

William is no longer employed as an electrician--was laid off from Wang after ten years. "Company, you know, keep like a trick on us, and we get laid off," Vera explains. Vera advised William to go to school in the intirim, saying, "No one can steal education."

Vera became the first Cambodian teacher in Lowell when she started teaching in 1985. At first she took eight to ten college courses a year; now takes one to three courses a semester (aim=120 credits for a Bachelor's degree). Needs two more courses for degree, then certification.

William shows picture of himself teaching sports at Thai camp. "Skinny" at camp (lack of food). V. and Wm. were paid ten "baht" (sp?) a day in Thailand currency (both were teaching).

Were in Thailand from 1979-1981 before "name called" to come to US (other countries offered as choices as well). They'd filled out forms. American agency came to camp, interviewed them. Hospital wanted to hire Vera as a nurse; she'd been a midwife in Cambodia. William, an electrician, does electrical work around the house now, and Vera values his skills.

Q.: Why come to Lowell?

Vera: First, came to NY, arriving in Brooklyn on Feb. 18, 1981. Lived there nearly one year. Son often sick, had to take subway to clinic. No welfare; food stamps provided, though. Husband got job in fifteen days. Worked for about \$3.00 an hour, traveled by subway a long distance to work. One day, a male friend living in Lowell called. Knew of Vera's background and education; said, "Come here!" In Lowell, he pointed out, are educational institutions, hospitals, an easier life.

January 5, 1982: Tiths came to Lowell--no welfare, no food stamps. Hard to find jobs at that time. Vera decided to go to work at Comet Products [makers of plastic utensils], then worked at Prince pasta factory in Lowell.

1985: Son late for school, bus didn't pick him up for some reason.

Vera called school (Greenhalge), brought son to school. She was asked that day to translate for another Khmer-speaking parent. Teacher talked to Mr. Gallagher (principal) and Ann O'Donnell (director of Bilingual Department) on Friday. Gave up well-paying job to start teaching at Greenhalge the following Monday. She has written down (in résumé form) these facts, so her children can see the sequence of events.

Vera explains that now, when they have free time, she and her husband lie down and "think about how we are now"; they feel amazed: "We supposed to be killed, that generation. . . . We [were] so skinny. . . . He [William] is still hurt--a lot of things he hold [inside]. . . . You cannot say no; if they say

you have to do, you have to do. . . . But we so lucky! Working so hard. . . . Very, very lucky."

Vera loves studying. Says her father "worked hard" for her, telling her, "No one can steal your education." Family was middle-class. In Cambodia, generally, "if you [are] a girl, you cannot get high education. Most [women] have to . . . stay home." Vera was lucky to finish school, then finish university at capital (Phnom Penh).

END OF SIDE A

SIDE B:

The Communists divided people. They gave different groups different food to eat. "New 17 March People" and "Old People, 18 March" were the two groups. The Old 18 People controlled the town. They wore black, too, but controlled, and might kill, the "17 people." Came in on Mar. 17 to control whole country. The 18 were like "the boss," and the 17 "the employees."

[The Tiths mean *APRIL*. The Communists invaded on 4/17/75.]

Hometown far from capital, close to "state": Battambang. William explains that primary school, high school, college were in "state," then university in Phnom Penh, capital.

William and Vera met at college one year before Communists came in. Not in class together. V. never saw him; he saw her. He told his mother he had noticed Vera. His parents went to Vera's home. Cambodian girls don't talk "in public or in private" to boys. The elementary schools are either all-boy or all-girl. There was some mixing in college. In classroom: one side girls, one side boys. Each "discusses" with own gender.

(In US, Vera says, there are many problems with pregnancy [among teens]. Boys and girls in Cambodia don't have much chance to talk. Girls "shy" with boys. "That is the culture." In US, boys and girls "close.")

--above story, cont.: Vera avoided looking at Wm's face (as was the custom). He'd seen her riding a motorcycle. Parents said for them to marry. In the work camp they, like most husbands and wives, were separated up for one, sometimes two weeks. Vera cooked for a thousand people. Some families did not get together at all. Some people's loved ones were killed.

Now the Tiths are thankful to be together, despite hard times. They try to save money, have no desire to be rich, are happy to survive. They rent out their upstairs to meet the costs of a high mortgage. At first all five in the family lived together (William's mother and the four Tiths). Vera stresses the importance of William's going to school (He's currently taking business courses.).

Lots of schools want Vera to work there next year. She loves Demo., Demo. program--children are together [integrated]. At Greenhalge, she heard an American child say, "Don't play with this Cambodian kid." Demo. kids, she says, disregard differences.

On culture and language:

Vera notes the value of language study. Knows French, used it in Montreal after car accident they were in. Writes in journal. William tells how they teach their kids Khmer for one hour a day. Kids are mainstreamed, but Vera says she doesn't want kids to "miss our [Cambodian] culture." Her son writes in Khmer to his aunt, and learns French and Spanish from Vera. AIM: to understand each other. English-only movement is like being "in your own pond." In Montreal, knowledge of other language proved very helpful.

Demonstration School: Demo kids use Khmer words naturally. Teaching opportunities could exist for Vera at the Greenhalge, Demonstration, Washington, and Lincoln Schools. Tells of when one Demo. faculty member left and kids cried. Cambodian proverb: People come in very happy--very, very sad to get out. Demo. plan is to rotate teachers out after two years. Vera has stayed extra year already and will stay at least one more year (by request). Notes importance of child readiness, importance of mutual understanding. Tries various ways to help kids learn vocabulary.

Celebrations: Soul Day--big celebration. Parents or family members pass away; life cycle is to come back, to be reborn. Soul "hang[s] around somewhere, looking to get a new life," may be hungry. "We are alive"--we make food, bring to temple. Monks pray for the deceased. William tells of how his mother's difficulties in life (childbearing and childrearing) mean "we have to do something special for her." Had monk pray for her during celebration. Cambodian custom is to cremate, but, he explains, "I miss[ed] her so much I cannot cremate her," and therefore buried her. He says he wanted "to leave her in one place," bought her a big plot (didn't want to step on any surrounding graves in placing flowers).

Monks use candles, incense in praying for deceased. Soul Day is on October 30th, near Halloween, Vera points out. Every Cambodian has to "do that." All souls looking for seventh temple, and if relatives don't "see you make anything and pray to them, . . . they cry. You won't be blessed. Two temples now, in Greater Lowell. He then shows a picture of a tray on which are Vera's father's leg bones, dug up and reburied in US in 1992. (He died in 1979.) William points out that the bones were "still good." Vera explains, "We do good things, we receive good things."

Vera's father died during "Communist generation." Not killed outright, but suffered due to lack of food during hard times (probably starved to death). Shows picture of family members, including five children with no parents, no "old people" to take care of them. [Two are Vera's sister's

children; three are Vera's siblings. Vera's sister died of starvation.] Vera's mother also may have died from starvation (indirect killing). Others killed by sticks or long knives; some were shot.

The Tiths collect pictures, stories, share accounts of Cambodian heroes. Vera considers herself a hero for surviving. Vera and Demo teachers talked with preschool and kindergarden students about heroes; Vera tells me my daughter Julie told of what she would do if she were a hero.

Vera and Wm. show picture in National Geographic of Cambodian mass grave, skulls. People were lined up and killed "like animals," hit with something like a bat. Maybe three million people killed. V. and Wm. teach their children about personal and national (Cambodian) history. Vera: "I pray every day that peace will [come] soon."

William: "If the Vietnamese don't want my country, . . . leave my country alone." He says China wants Cambodia too.

Picture of cars in a heap--they (Vietnamese) took tires to make sandals. Picture of a stripped Mercedes. Took ?(some car part) to make a spoon. ("No education.")

Vera says their son Samnang wanted to go to Angkor Wat, but couldn't go--not safe. Vera went there once as a child. Belief that people who go are lucky. Thais, some think, want Angkor Wat. (Displayed in the Tiths' living room are 2 large pictures--one of wood?--of Angkor Wat.)

They show me a special beaded piece made by Vera's mother over long period of time. Desire to familiarize their kids with Camb. culture, through collected, displayed objects.

Show picture of son Samnang, who, at age nine, became a Buddhist monk. As a monk, he'd use a beaded piece, and eat only twice a day (morning and afternoon). Head shaved, beautiful white lace shawl over one shoulder.

1987: William was a CMAA leader, after Narin Sao.

Son was monk for 10 weeks. Few Cambodian boys do this. Having a son like that means luck for parents. William had become a monk for his mother, to "open way for her," in accordance with "Buddha Bible." Wm's mom passed away peacefully at St. Joseph's Hospital in Lowell. Wm. tells story of guy with many children, many sons, but none who "opened way." Vera adds that man found it "hard to pass away." William says he tried to determine why the man suffered so, and learned he'd been a jail guard and pehraps had beaten people and was now getting his payback.

FIRST IMPRESSION OF US (New York):

William: "My feet were like the people [walking on] the moon." Big country. At market, "everything new in the refrigerator! Everything fresh!"

Vera: "For me, it was scary."

William: Wrote home about NY ("Words coming out from my heart") to mother, brother, sister-in-law in Cambodia.

Vera tells of first time seeing snow, Feb. 18, day of arrival. She was wearing sandals. "What happened?" she asked a tall man who was picking them up. Said to herself, "New life. What should I do?" The Tiths were given \$45.00 (\$15 for each of the three of them). The man transporting them went to look for William's name, found it, brought them to hotel. William bought some food at grocery store. Vera couldn't sleep; snow coming down. "This is the new country. What should I do? They have rice to eat or not?" No training at Thailand camp. Others were trained in Philippines and Malaysia; they weren't. Went directly to US.

William tells that his application was, he thought, worded such that he'd indicated his life was in danger due to Communists. Lots of countries listed for them to pick from. They'd picked US, because he had studied English. Said no to French option. (French called first.)

Vera explains she had friends in Switzerland who had purchased tickets for her to go there. Chose US instead; feels "lucky" to be here.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

Interview ended as tape ran out. Missed answer to question: Is there anything you don't like about the United States?

ANS.: an unequivocal "Nothing!" The Tiths consider themselves very lucky to be in the US. They are effusive in their gratitude. They wanted very much for their parting remarks to be recorded, and I promised to record them on paper. They would not complain about anything about life in the US. In closing they reiterated their gratitude.

SEE "FULL TRANSCRIPT"

Full Transcript

of that part of the conversation with Vera and William Tith that
appears on the Master Tape but not on copies of that tape:

Q: Were there things you decided you didn't like about the United States?
(Silence) Or have you decided that there are things that you don't like . . .

Vera: In the United States?

William: They have many countries, they have application, like France,
Belzig [Belgium?], Australia, and etc.

V.: Japanese, too. A lot of country, you know.

Q: You could pick a country?

Wm.: And then I pick United States because at that time when I was at the
college and university I study English, and I decided, "Oh, maybe I come to
United States, because I already know some English, and then I already
study," and we decide to come to United States, and I found . . .

V.: We put application in . . .

Wm.: . . . United States call. The French call first and we decide we don't
want to go there.

Q.: The French called first?

Wm.: Yes. We just, we didn't decide to go France. We decided wait to the
United States only. And special my wife have friend in Switzerland.

V.: Usually they want, before Communists, they wanted me to go to Swiss,
too, but on that time, you know, seem like a balancing: Which way I go?
Which way I go? When I go, I miss my family, you know, so that's why I
stuck with the Communist . . .

Wm.: You remember when they give you cowida [words unclear]* . . . (See
page 10.)

V.: They wanted me to take to the Swiss . . .

Wm.: They remember, one Swiss lady, she [Vera] work at the hospital . . .

V.: They already gave everything, you know, buy airline, air ticket, for me,
but I cannot go. That's why we lucky we came to the United States. We
very lucky . . .

END OF TAPE

*When I inquired about this word, Vera told me that the "Swiss lady gave [her] clothes already cut for [her] size and a necklace timer."