

Interviewee: Sam Ung
Date: December 2nd, 2009 (2:00PM)
Interviewed By: Mijin Richard
Transcribed By: Alice Kim
Location: Wing Luke Museum (?)

Okay. So my name is Mijin Richard, I'm here with Sam Ung to conduct a refugee oral history interview. The day is December 2nd, 2009, the time is about two o'clock, um, so Sam, can you—do you agree to the interview waiver and--?

Yeah, I do.

To be interviewed today?

Mmhm.

Wonderful. Um, let's start—so I'm going to ask you some basic questions and get into more detail as we go. So um, when and where you were born?

I was born in Battambang City, Battambang Province in Cambodia.

Mmhm.

1955, in February 28th.

Okay. And, um, where were you raised? And what was life—?

I was raised in Sam City until the... 79th (unintelligible)_____.

Okay. So from fifty-five till seventy-nine?

Mmhm.

Um, and in our pre-interview you talked about growing up with a lot of diversity in your community... can you tell me a little bit about that experience?

It's here about... in this country?

What's that?

I don't...

Uh, what growing up in a community, you said that you grow up with a lot of Muslim and Indian and Middle Eastern—

Yeah, and all a lot of different races, people, different culture people, we get along just fine.

Yeah. Can you tell me about what was like?

Viet—Vietnamese, you know, Vietnamese, Chinese, Cambodian, Indian, Middle Eastern people.

Mmhm.

Well, when we were kids we get along with everybody. It's...

Okay. And this was in Battambang?

Yeah.

Okay. Um, how would you describe your parents?

Oh, my parents are great parents. My—my dad was already a, what do you call it, a community person, he—he was the head of the Fedjyu(?) Community Organization for twenty-some years president, and it was twenty-two president of Chinese Community Cemetery...

Oh, okay.

And it was a lot—that in Battambang, they have three schools and they're two: one's Pho (?), one's Cantonese school.

Mmhm.

So we, uh, That Tsu Seong (?), he was the School Board Member.

Oh, okay. Wow, sounds like he did a lot.

Yeah, he did a lot for the community. So my mom, speaking Pho (distant talking in background), um, before she came to stay, she know how to read and write four different languages: French, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Tong (?). And she speak two-three different dialects in Chinese, and then she come to the States and started English, she just very quick, easy for her.

Yeah. Um, when you were in Cambodia, where did your mother and father work?

Well, they owned their own business, you know. First, during World War II, they have a noodle cart.

Okay.

And they live in—so later on, until early sixty, they set up the new public market, they get their own place so we have a café that sits thirty, forty people, and then later on, a few years later, they buy out the next door and expand like eighty seating, ninety seating...

Oh, okay.

Yeah. Open café, you know. You can see people cooking in the back and sit there.

Yeah. That's pretty big. Eighty or ninety?

Yeah. Busy. They're good persons.

Very good. Um, so what do you think of when you hear the term refugee?

Well, we—I always consider I'm a refugee where I came from, you know? But the—there's a lot of people don't want to have saying the name, you can't change that. For me, it's okay, you know. I was a refugee, I'm still a refugee. You know come from different country, try to make a living, raise a family.

Mmhm. So do you ever talk about your experience?

Oh yeah, yeah. I always share experience—people want to know what's going on then I share experience.

Mmhm. What—what kind of venue do you that at? Like where?

Well, the restaurant, you know, like some people wondering what's going on, kinda brief, you know, explain what's going on, why we left the country and so...

Yeah. Okay... um, and was there a specific incident or moment, uh, you chose you leave Cambodia?

Well, when we left Cambodia, because it was Communist, and we've been through so much tough time, and then the seventy-nine (unintelligible)_____ Vietnamese leave Cambodia. So we—we don't have any plan because a lot of people have left—head west to Thailand, from Battambang to Thailand... about a hundred-twenty kilometer, so everybody left, thousands and thousands, it never end the line, we just follow the crowd. So, uh, main thing is, we just want to stay away from war, that's all.

Yeah.

And they didn't have any plans and well, we got to go to another country, we never know, we try to get away from the border.

Just packed up and headed out?

Yeah.

Um, let's see, so what was the process? Kind of—can you tell me starting from the times that—you and your family decided to leave your home in Cambodia till the time you got to the refugee camp? Um, can you kind of tell us what happened?

Oh, okay. Okay, do you want me to speak like from beginning?

Mmhm.

You know, you know, we used to, you know, see the picture there, the whole family, we used to live in the house, like three story-house, like a brick building, you know. One door, one door. So we stay in one unit (coughs), three story-house, you know, just the whole family, ten-twelve, plus the—my nephew and nieces, about fifteen people, you know.

Wow.

Families always stay together. So, until, you know, my dad been to—he left China when he was about fourteen years old, away from, you know, during the World War II, and get to Cambodia, met my mom, did a lot of hard work there, you know, work on the farm for people, local people and then later on, he started noodle cart and metted my mom and raised us, you know, until 1970—'69. And then, when I was, you know, I'm the fifth boy in the family, we have seven brother and one sister. So, you know, when the time I grow up, you know, that time when everybody help out their parents, when Muslim was so good, he build a house like four and a half-story, seven by city-block, you know, like, four and a half-meter wide, four and a half-story high, and thirty-five yards deep. So we can-- we can we have this

front door and back door and both sides are all straight, so uh, by the time the war finished and when the Khmer took over in seventy-five, seventy-five, and we lost everything, you know. We got chased out from the city and we go become a farmer, so then, you know, in my life obviously feel sorry for my parents, it was so hard, ready to retire, suddenly become homeless, nothing, no home, you know, their life different.

How did they become homeless?

When the Communists took over, Khmer Rouge, what they call Khmer Rouge, they chase out people—over three days—they chase out everybody from the city like, you watch the movie “Killing Fields” (unintelligible)____. In '75, April 17th till January 7th, there's nobody living the city, only the military or somebody else, you know, their own people, Khmer Rouge. And the city, every city's a ghost city, nobody living there, they don't even have money to spend, after three days, currency's no use, so you go farm, they start in the cold, do the hard work, and every, like noon or 5PM, they ring the bell.

Mmhm.

So you go to the community place, they feed you. Whatever they give, you got it, whatever they don't, you don't get it. So you know, there's never have enough food, around four years, and never full, and the meal—not even a meal, you know, you get a rice, boiling water, and salt, boiled vegetable, it's nothing else, you don't get no breakfast time. Early noon, like early evening, that's all. And if you're sick, you don't get—you get half of what the regular people get.

Okay, and this was...?

During the Khmer Rouge.

During the Khmer Rouge... this was not in camp though?

No, it's in the farm.

Oh, okay, in the farm.

It's like, you know, like when I—the people say: oh, you go to jail, right? The jail has a gate right? But during the Khmer Rouge, what I call “hell without gate”, but they have, uh, they draw the line you can't cross. See you live in this village, that's all you belong, you want to get to the other place, you have to get permission, otherwise they catch you, they kill you.

Oh, do you know why that was, why they did that?

I don't know, they're crazy.

Do you remember having any, um, interaction with the Khmer Rouge? Like, so for example, when your family was kicked out of the house, do you remember--?

They—(coughing) excuse me, you know, we had to lead the way, they tell us to lead, lead, you know. You can't say no, always say yes, otherwise they kill you, so we always had to learn to survive. Do what they tell you to do.

Yeah. Definitely. So how did you get to the refugee camp?

Well... 1979, January 7th, they've been—was—they've been the Vietnamese invade Cambodia, so they set us free, so we went back to the city, try to stay in that house... we only get to stay two nights, we get kicked out from the Cambodian Army, they say they have to re-set up the city, but the house belong to us, we couldn't get it. So then we, you know, homeless, and we go back to the farm, somewhere, stay in the shelter... you know, like a big grain warehouse where a lot of people meet there and suddenly they say: oh, a lot of people are crossing the border to Thailand, you know. So we just follow and the war's still going and... we just follow the crowd down to Thailand, we didn't have any plan, you know, because we're homeless, become nothing, don't have anything. And the war going and we try to stay away from war and that's all we in Thailand for. And during the time, you know, when before we went to—left to Thailand to Cambodia—one of my brother left first, he didn't tell us, until we went, we went separately, so we went separate ways, so in one of the camps, there's a man in red cloth pick up people and refugee, so they call somebody's name and sound like his name, so we say: that's him! So we get in company first, and then uh, we was—in the—by the time the Cambodian border, actually, Tai Sang, they stay there couple weeks, and then we got sent back, you know, they tell: oh, the Red Cross, the International Red Cross—the UN, you know, lease some islands for the refugee, so they lie to us, they have whole bunch of bus, so they separate all different people, and so Lao—they have Lao people in Cambodia too, okay, and the Muslim, okay, and the Cambodian and the Chinese at least, so there's a—I don't know how many buses—and they bus us home like early afternoon, we get to the mountaintop like—almost, like, really early in the morning, like two-three o' clock. So when we ride the bus, you know, all day we get there, and suddenly we see all the lights are on—have all the flashlights, direct on the bus, kick us off the bus, and we realize, we on top of the mountain somewhere, you know? There was a border in Cambodia and Thailand—the mountain, this side on top of the mountains, Thai, down the other way's Cambodia, so not long later, the sun start to rise, and they shoot them down until people get down the hill, the mountain...

Mmhm.

Then whoever the first group get down there, they hit them—the, the minefields, they start to blew up. (Coughing) And then we—we afraid to go down, but you can't turn back, they shoot at you, the Thailand army shoot.

This is on the way? To the refugee camp?

No, I mean, the refugee camp, we get sent back. So we went down there, stay on the mountainside for a couple weeks, you know, trying to get out the trail, because there's a minefield, there's one time I saw—you know, we went down the first day, I saw people hit by the mine, some of them half, you know, not really dead, yet stuck together... and when we were in the wet water, you know that time according to somebody, you know, during that time about fifty-some thousand people that go down that way—get sent back, so you have to scope the water, you know and that time it was... sometime in late May or so. It kind of dry season over there and the—you know, all the water, the stream kinda dry, a lot of sections—some sections deeper than level water, right? So people go there get water for drinking, and that time it was two—two guys that blew up by the mine, by the water. One in the water dead, the other one kind of crawl out and die off by the water, and nobody go help because there's a lot of mine

that they don't know where, you know? So we have a—during that water, that dead man in water for a week or so, and then we move on. So every day, we start the (unintelligible)_____, just follow the crowd, you know? Ten-twenty feet a day or so, until one day I heard the mine blew up and then there was Vietnamese army come up and kinda try to open the trail for people to get out. We thankful for that... And stealing! There was a lot of—thousands and thousands people who try to get just on trail. And there was one day, it was in line, you know, we kind of pack up, early morning, wait for people to move so we can move forward and get out of the forest. And there was one guy I saw, you know, trying to cut off the line and people keep yelling and... I mean we listen, just go on then stop, hit the mine, heard the noise, go zoom! Then the person disappear and a lot of people were, you know, stand by there in the line get hurt. And finally, we stop there at least two week and we got out of the main road, and keep walking about a month to get to the—to pass the forest, you know, we walk about thirty-forty kilometers every day. And then we get to the, uh, a city that the—about seventy kilometers from our hometown, and I settle there, and my brother and my family all went back to the hometown.

Oh, really?

Yeah.

So who was left?

I—I only—I'm the only one that stayed at the—the small town and seventy kilometers from Battambang, my hometown. So the rest went back to the hometown.

Okay.

And then I did some work, they don't look for work and... during the time, you know, they don't spend money, they spend gold!

Oh, okay.

Everything used by gold, you know, they have a small scale and cut little pieces.

Hmmm! Interesting...

It was tough time.

Yeah...

And whatever I make, I sent back to my mom, help her and support my sister.

Mhmm. Why did your family go back?

Why do you think of—

Decide to go back and you just stay here?

(Coughing) Yeah, they go—they go back with the—you know, we always go back to our hometown where we grow and raise, you know. So that was strange place for them, they go home so I stay here, decide to look for work, but from that—from that town to the borders, it'll be like... fifty kilometers, you know.

Okay. So the town in Cambodia, or...?

So I—yeah, yeah. In Cambodia.

Okay.

So we go to Thai border, about fifty kilometers—I, you know I—when halfway to get back to I, I always tell my family said, I not going to stay in Cambodia no more because you see the red flag, you know? Communists! I said, I—only chance I have I go—I head back to Thailand. So I worked there, you know... a couple town and then when we people go pass the—no couple town I've been about four-five time. You know, go through the forest, to the bor—Thai border, you know, buy trade stuff, carry bags, sell it. And I try to find some relatives in Thailand, you know. You know, try to get connection. But I found my oldest brother's father-in-law that—he stay in a Thai side border town, so I get the connection. And then later on I came back, you know, try to arrange my brother go. So he, he told my brother to go to refugee camp and his wife and kid. And then later, later on... '79, I marry my wife.

Well how—can we back up? How did you meet your wife and...?

Okay, um, in—when I went back from living at—sent back from Thailand in '79, so I work in the town, you know, work for somebody else and the... one day, my—one of my brother, my third brother said—oh my uncle, you know. He want to open a café. But he... he broke his arm, fall off the wagon, so... his partner was my wife's aunt's husband. So... my brother said: well, you know, I'm going to need some—need help opening the café, so I went there and help him set up, you know, open up the shop and I'm the one doing all the cooking and stuff. And then later on, my wife's aunt brought her over to do dishwashing.

Oh, okay.

And then we arrange by the, you know, my aunt and her aunt—actually (laughing) I think even we didn't even like that much!

Oh, really?!

Yeah!

So, was it an arranged marriage?

Yeah, yeah. So, uh, I said okay, you know, it's culture you know.

Yeah, it is.

I would marry in '79—thirty years pass. And after that, I told my wife—my wife the oldest in the family, she has... six brothers and sisters, all younger one. So I said: well, you know after the... we open the café for a while and then, you know, over the year—during the war and then they, they close the market, they move people out from the town and kinda on the outskirt. So out there we couldn't do much living, so I can't make no money so I told her, I said: you know, I have—I want to go to the border refugee camp, you know, we find something, do something—like a living or... But still, you know, war go—I said well I heard they could go open the refugee camp. So I went there, you know, took my wife and one my brother-in-law follow me (unintelligible)_____. And then I went there about... a few week to see—I saw

the situation kinda settle down—they start to open a refugee camp and I came back, left my wife there, because my mom, my brothers, they all went there to the border already. So I went to meet them there, so I leave my wife there, I told her: I go get back to get her mom, because her father pass away in '75, a few days before the Khmer Rouge started.

Oh, okay.

So, you know, they—I think they mostly left my mother-in-law depend on me, well I become the man, you know. I can move. The other—the other brother-in-laws all pretty young, so I went there, asked her: I said, you want to go with me? We just gamble off future—I don't know what it would be. But at least, if we go there—go to refugee camp, you know. We stay safe and see what's going on. If the war is over, we can start and come back, right? But we—we didn't have any intention to, you know, go different country, whatever. It's not option. We just want to stay away from war, so... I talk to the... the cousin, you know, my wife's uncle. Those guys there the same, like me, sent back from Thailand, you know, we walk so long to get home, and they all scared. They told my mother-in-law said: well, I don't think you want to go, you know, you get sent back, you have to get a lot of kid, it's horrid. And I told her, I said the same thing, I said: well, I don't know, I can't guarantee what's going on, you know. I just—like gamble, you know. You lose or win. I said: anyway, I won't stay in Cambodia. If you want to go tomorrow, pack it up and go. Then she did, pack it up and left the home and go. And they took all the young brother-in-law, sister-in-law, you know. We walk and stop on the way, like organize in the woods and we get to the border, and the—I met my wife. And then the... we stay there, let's see, around a month, and I heard that they pick all the refugee, you know. Whoever want to go to camp they—that time, they call Kallidang (?), that's the biggest camp, they have like, you know, more than hundred-thousand refugee.

So this was in what year?

In Thailand, 1979.

Okay.

So, I—I get in the camp in November 30th, 1979. So that time, the UN, you know, all the... organizations came, all kinds of organizations there have—they give us a ten bamboos (?) and we be all, we be all in the camp, we stay there. So this living section, section... so when the camp, you know, set up and they have all different international from all different country—the clinic, you know, help people. So, my mom speaks Thai and the—she go help in the clinic, she get me into the working the... kinda helping the clinic, you know. Trans—trans, uh, interpret. So I know—I know only a little bit. But I meet the doctor there—the Thai doc—army doctor. He's Tae-Jiik (?), speak my dialect, so I say: okay. So I even speak Tae-Jiik with you, okay. So he, he teach me how to speak Thai, help me out, you know, okay, what kind of sickness, how to say Thai, something—he train me. So I work along with him, so I leave, okay. I work for a while and then the... I think the clinic change. The Thai's gone and some different country go, so I off work for a while, stay in the camp, wait for—like once a week, I think. That he do so much for, you know, how many people, and the clothes, and then they be—mostly all camp fish. Sardine, tuna, rice... (coughs). And then the till... late July, when they split up the camp, you know, kinda—so they, they had lot, you know, in the US, they pose a lot of land, you know, for interview. So I didn't—I didn't expect that they had a name—they come to state. So when my neighbor, you know, same age me, we kinda like

joke-talking, you know, joke. So he said: hey, your name's on the board, you know. You go to US! I said: no, you're kidding. You want to bet? I said: no, I don't have any money to bet!

Yeah.

So then I look, and I think it's my name. So I line up next day for interview. Then uh, after that, two day, they had a bus coming, they call your names, you know, they tell you—they call people by name, they check the list, so you get on the bus.

So did you apply or...?

That time—yeah, my, one—we separate—one my brother, Henry's name. So they came me first, and they make a sponsorship for us. So my mom left before me to the state, one month she get here: July. I got here August 4th, '79.

Oh, okay.

So, that time, you know, uh, we pretty lucky. We get—we get to split the big camp so... I got my name, me and my wife, to come to the States. So on the half-way, you know what they call the "transfer camp". So they do all the process, go through the immigration and all the interview.

Where was the...?

In Thailand.

Okay. Transfer camp?

Yeah, that before I came here. That's what the—that's why they give you the numbers: CB, I think is Cambodia or something, so...

Oh, okay. So this—where was this picture taken?

That—that was in transfer camp before I come to the States.

In the transfer--?

After the—it have interview with US Embassy or the Immigration—they give you the number so that take the picture.

Oh, okay. Do you know city the transfer camp was in?

Um, Chungburi (?).

Can you spell that?

I don't... (laughs).

Shum-boh-ree?

Chun—chun-boh-ree.

Chung-boh-ree.

Bo—boh-ree, yeah. B-O-R-I-N-G-H. Chung—chang—G-H. E-N. Chon, chon? O-N. O-N.

O-N? Chonburi.*

Yeah.

(*NOTE: Looking up the name, it seems most likely that they refer to specifically Chonburi (City of Water) or the main province of the same name. Both are located on the coast of the Gulf of Thailand.)

Okay.

And then I stay there about ten days or... and then they transfer to Bangkok: the camp in Bangkok. That's the final stop.

Mmhm.

For three days. Then I was—I was canc—you know, there was Lao, Cambodian, Vietnamese, all Indo-China, like these. So then I—I was speaking to one of Thai police, the one in charge of the camp, you know, I was chatting with him. Oh, you speak Thai. I told him: yeah, I speak Chinese, Cambodian, Vietnamese too. Oh, okay. Can you help me, you know? I said: yeah, sure. So that—they tell me how to tell those people what to do, you know kind of. So that they—before departure, they give me a pack, they give me a pass, so I can go to Bangkok City, kinda tour around.

Oh...

So I did that, had one day. I went out there. And then uh, the next day morning—so they, they put everybody on the bus, go—went to the airport. I didn't know what airport—it's not the international airport, part of in the military. It's so dark, I didn't see any plane that's borne there: 747. So people had to line up, so they want—they give me one, what do they call it the... uh, like a speaker?

Oh, yeah.

What do you call that?

Yeah, speakerphone. Megaphone?

Yeah, speakerphone. Yeah, so I tell those people: line up, you know, who, speak Thai and Vietnamese, you know, line up, and go on the airplane. And that—only me left! So I ask the Thai police, what happened? My wife's not even been in. She just waiting! I was scared, I was: uh-oh, probably the airplane took off and he keep me here. I was scared, I didn't know until later on, all finished, okay. So he put in me up. They walk me up the stairs, up the—gee, that was first class (laughs)!

Oooooohh...!

747, you know. It's seating, oh that was nice.

Mmhm.

So I got here, you know, touched down in San Francisco and signed in US. And then the next day, they have the interpreter, you know, putting us through the airport. And I just fly from San Francisco to here the next day (coughs).

Does this go to... to what?

To Seattle.

To Seattle?

So this—that's the couple there—that's my sponsor. And my younger brother went to pick me up in the airport. Yeah, he got here first. And then uh, one month before I got here, my mom and uh, my youngest brother.

Okay. So your mom—so what was kind of the order of people who came to the US?

My mom—the first one came, that's my sixth brother, in the '79...

And did he come alone?

Yeah.

Okay.

And then uh, in '80, July, my mom and my brother came here first. And then me. And then my sister and her son.

Oh, that's you?

Yeah.

Ohhhh...!

And then uh, my oldest brother with his family. They—they came from Thailand and they stop in the Sea-Tac? So we went to meet him, we thought he'd stay here. But he said: no, he get a flight to California, Long Beach, because his brother-in-law sponsor him. So then now they stay in Long Beach since uh... '81 or so. So they come in separate time.

Mmhm. How—how did—was this couple your sponsor the whole time?

Yeah.

What were their names?

Uh... Robert He—Hex, and a Rube Hex.

Robin Hex and Rube?

Ro—Robert, Robert. Hex.

Oh, Robert. Hex. H-E...?

C...

C-K-S?

Uh... C-I, no-no, Hicks. H-I-C-K, right? S.

Oh, Hicks.

Hicks. Hicks, yeah. They used to have a church here, you know, on the ten—10th Avenue, the old Chinese Church?

Uh-huh. Oh, they did?

Yeah, they had a service there. We had to come—I had to come to the church every Sunday and they only moved from there to uh, the building.

Mmhm.

(Coughs) There on top of the modern store. Modern, you know, on Jackson and Mainer, up the stair? Up here?

Oh, yeah... okay. Before it came down?

Yeah. Yeah.

How did your family meet then?

Well, let's see—see that time—when my brother do a sponsor paper, go through like a church, you know, he sponsor lot of refugee. Even weak one.

Oh, okay.

Ma—may come? Market and uh, there's a lot of success business people here. He sponsor—he—they told me they sponsor about six-seven hundred refugee.

Oh, my.

Yeah.

So what does it mean to be sponsored?

Well I—I think he's just represent the church. That time when we came, the—what's it called, C-W-L-Churchwall(?) Service? When we got here they gave us one-hundred and twenty dollars each—

Oh, okay.

So we can pay, you know, rent, buy pots and pans, some place to stay...

And did they buy your plane ticket?

No, we pay it back later.

You pay it back?

Yeah, like twenty dollars. So that time—they sent me the bill, you know, like four-hundred and some dollars for two. So we pay back like twenty or thirty each month after we get a job.

Oh, okay. Plane tickets used to be cheaper, huh?

Yeah.

(Laughs) Um...

The whole plane when, uh, flies is about—I heard that the Thai police, the one in charge of the camp, said about five-hundred twenty people. I don't know, '47—'47 how many people load. There's about five-hundred twenty.

Yeah, yeah.

There's a lot of people.

Yeah, 'cause that's a big plane! Um... so what things did you or your family bring with them?

We had nothing. I have two sets of clothes and a blanket, that's all I have. Each—nothing!

Did your mom or your other family members bring anything?

So—you know, we're... homeless people, don't have any belonging (laughs). We were homeless during the war, yeah nothing.

Okay. And what about, um, like values or practices or things like that?

We don't have nothing. We didn't have nothing.

Okay.

That's why sometimes my wife say, no we don't marry, we didn't even have a ring for me.

Mmhm (laughs).

I say: well, we wasn't have anything back then, we have everything right now, what do you expect more?

Yeah. Does she have a ring now?

No (laughs).

No ring (laughs)?

Ah, no (laughs)!

Um, what about things, not physical things, but you know like growing up, um, did you—things that your family did or sayings that your mom had—kind of like cultural values, things like that? What type of—did you bring any of those type of things here? Like things kind of more in your head that...?

Oh, okay. No, we've been raised up—see my mom and her mom, my grandma, right? My father from China, my grand—my dad's side in China... so my grandma and my mom, it's where they like, uh, really Buddhist religion people.

Oh, okay.

Always teach us nice and care, everything, you know. I got a lot of inspiration from my mom because my dad, he always busy with the community, and my mom that—my mentor, you know, tell me, you know, teach us all common sense and all, nice things, you know, be kind to people, help people.

Um, so did you—is your dad in this picture?

No, he passed away in 1987, during the Khmer Rouge.

Oh, okay. So he didn't—

No, no. Not '87. '78.

'78? Oh, okay. Do you want to talk a little about that? About what happened?

Well, uh, see in '75, we left the city, my dad kind of, you know, sick so... he had some liver problem.

Okay.

And then uh, during the time with the—you know, there's no doctor or hospital because they cure all the good people and smart people during the crazy time. And you know, the sulfur and whatever you get, like tree bark or whatever, you know? Can the— called the old time medicine. I think they couldn't help. So you know, since before that, he was like a cemetery president, you know, and stuff, he help out a lot of people too. Like, during World War II, there's some people, you know, they marry, they have kid, so they don't wanna go army, the fighting, they ran away, they get to Cambodia, then they get old. And some of dying, no relative, nobody, you know? So my dad that go collect the body and buy the new coffin, buy them like—bury. His own money, not the community money. He did a lot of nice things, so one year that I was in the state here, when I opened my business... so one guy, you know, eat there, go there, become friend. So we talk about, you know, where we came from, some stuff, so I said: oh, what your father's name? I told him the name, then: yeah, I remember! That time during the '73 or '74, you know? I'm—that's my neighbor, one of the old man die, nobody care, you know. Well they took care—your dad he told me the name, you know. They come in and collect all the bodies and you know, buy stuff, coffin, bed (?). He said: that's how I know your dad! I said, oh, okay. So he leave a lot of legacy behind, some people, you know, in the old—the old generation a lot—a lot of people in the town, they know my father.

Yeah.

So during, you know, he did a lot of nice thing too, you know? He send—he been raise money in the house—couple of old people, that they have family back in China? So he raise money, send, you know, couple of old folk back home, renew him with the family, getting some money, you know, go around raising money. And uh, you know, buy land, expand for the cemetery. Bury all the Chinese. And uh, during the Khmer Rouge time, he get so sick you know? Something grow behind his neck and some—he always agony, painful, you know. And every time you know, we had to go out during the time, you know, they split—they split up the kid, young kid, you know. Uh... teenage girls, boys, all separate. All working the separate camp, you know. And the old, the married ones stay in the village to—the younger one, they go far away to work! So every time I come home, you know, I see... agony, he's a—giving him,

you know, some kind of towel, maybe massage. Go back to work, so you don't get punished. Won't late for work, you know?

Oh...

So one day, you know, I think he pain—he's so painful it start to pus(?) again. So I don't—I don't, why I deserve something like this, you know, in my life, I never hurt a hand, I never hurt nobody, always doing my thing, I shouldn't deserve by that, you know. Why don't you take on somebody who's, you know, those command—that killing people, torture people, you know? I shouldn't deserve by this. So the end you know, it's the end of his life, just die... '78. I was about thirty—around thirty miles away up in the mountain cutting bamboo, and my brother on the other side of the mountain, you know, twenty miles away from the relig—the relief? So he went and got me, so I walk with him, you know, halfway, staying the hillside, mountainside, they make it to the next day home, but they buried him already. And then uh, during that time, you know, we didn't have nothing. I (unintelligible)_____ with my brother, you know, they had to keep the blanket with my mom, you know? (Unintelligible)_____. They uh... rice sack, the one they put rice? Around him, bury him. I said: no-no, life is not fair. They take all the nice people, they take only... no bad people.

Mmmm, so your... was it your family who buried him?

No, the old friend. They and my brother too. We all right now, see: my third, my fourth, and me. That's a long way. My second brother pass away before—before that. Because then something get technic (?), you know, technic, sick and die? He left three kids.

How old were you? When your dad passed away?

'78 now... uh, '75, I was twenty... twenty-three.

Twenty-three?

Yeah.

Okay. Ah, how did your family react to your father passing...?

We was shocked, you know. We lost piece of our heart. I have—I have a lot of detail story that hold—give them some great story. Like my sister, she marry in the... early '77, no, early seventy—spring '76. Uh, she have a kid, after uh, six months, her husband sick and die. She never married again. And I have two of my oldest brothers have a girl, a boy and a girl. So the boy was about three years old... the youngest one about one. And they all starved to death. So they all five— just within their family here.

How did that happen, the little ones?

They starved to death.

In...?

The food. They start to, you know, the body's draining out.

Was this in camp?

In Cambodia, during the Khmer Rouge. They don't have any—they don't have enough food to eat. So every meal is, you know, raining season, kinda cook, you can eat a lot, right? They give you boiled rice, water, you know, boiled water with rice? They don't even give you plate, you know, keep—during the war, about two spoon of rice left, and every time—you know, when I was young, I eat a lot you know. When they—during the time, you know, during all the water and have food: two spoon of rice and that (unintelligible)____. Because I don't want to eat with the water, you can't feel the rice, you chew long, kinda chew slowly and... then you can feel the rice. And they give you like... five, six rock salt to eat with that. But during harvest time, like you know, January to April, so yeah. The weather, really hot and dry. So you drink a lot of water. And they cook, you know, that hot rice, you know like the rice served in this one. You can't eat much. They tell: oh, eat much more. But in the working time, in the spring, or... spring or summer here, over there's the rainy season... that's climbing season, in the field, you hungry, and they don't give you enough food.

Mmhm.

So it's kind of starving to death in some way. You just say something against them, they take you out and kill you. And most of the time, you know, at night when they go to sleep, you know, you fill like a half-bucket of water and you starving because it's all liquid, you know, there's no food. So you turn around, you can (unintelligible)_____.

Mmhm.

And uh, back in when, you know, before Khmer Rouge, you know, we have a restaurant. That time, you know, I eat one meal, I had one pound of noodles, to cook biggest bowl in the restaurant, maybe. Maybe four or five meals a day. But when—when the Khmer Rouge, they do—the first six, eight months, I lost six inch of weight. We had to get used to, can't say no, just do what they tell you to do.

Yeah.

Try to survive, learn how to survive. I walk without shoes, at least more than three years. When we first went in, I still had shoes. They don't—no more shoes. You can't buy, you can't get anywhere, unless they gave it to you. You know the shoes over there during the time, they cut from the tire. Car tire? And with the gauntlet (?) thing.

Oh, okay. So did they sew it together?

No, not sew it. The t-tire, they pull the string, I mean the... what do you call it? It's a rubber band... big rubber, you know? Bit like the shoes. So they have that. Even when they send me up the mountain, cut bamboos and stuff. I walked without shoes for years!

Your feet must be pretty tough then, huh?

Yeah, first—first painful. We walk through elephant grass field and cut elephant grass. I feel like I walking on—on the nail poking me. I was crying.

Um... so moving to life in the United States, uh, can you tell me about your arrival in the US, in 1980?

Well, when I first arrived, around 1980... I was getting used to, especially just got out of war. Maybe in night, I hear siren, a fire truck, get up and scared. But uh... there's not too many people here.

Where did you--?

Canda—I live up on the top of here. On the... what you call it, Bellevue Avenue and Olive Way and uh... Denney Way, around the corner.

Oh, okay.

So then, there's a lot of—not a lot, there's few people there. So we—my mom live in the studio. So when I got here, I go in the studio so—so my mom and my brother move to the other apartment close to all Cambodian community up there. Well, we have ten, fifteen family up here, so we close by so... when I came to Chinatown, there's not too many grocery stores, so we had to ride the bus, come here, across the street from my restaurant, not the (unintelligible) _____ way? Used to be a Wasan Gorcery? So I buy most grocery from there, and then take the free bus ride pass the old Bon Marché, Macy? The last three stop we carry the stuff, walk up the hill. So we down by the big ice store 50 Cent (?). Until later on, you know, when the first big bar open, you know, and uh, 6th Avenue and Hillside, and the other Vietnamese place open and the small grocery, then we get all type of grocery from those people.

Yeah. That's cool. Um, and can you tell me a little about working in the United States? (Sam coughing.)

Uh, because in our pre-interview, you talked about, uh, what you know from hands-on—

Yeah.

Experience and you used your common sense? Can you say more?

So when uh, back in the time when I was sixteen, you know I worked—I worked... I helped my parents I think about ten, eleven-years-old washing dishes. So around sixteen, I could cook in the restaurant, you know, I uh... working table and cooking, so basically the—I know about cooking. So when I first got here, you know, went to school, out there a few block from there: the Seattle Central Community College—

Okay.

Taking English class, couple hour-day, you know, like three days a week. That is hard, you know, I couldn't—I couldn't memorize how, you know, because I couldn't speak English. I couldn't even spell how many letters put up the words. So after a couple quarter I got a job at Ivar, but I mean before then... I worked there because my brother here, he worked at Ivar, busboy. So he took me over there, talked to manager, and the manager was Thai, so I talk—so I speak Thai to him, so he said: well, you know how to work at the restaurant? I said: yeah. In the state, I don't—I haven't worked yet, but back home, you know, I grow up in a restaurant. I know restaurant work. So he said: okay, do you wanna work? I said: yeah, give me a try, you know? Two day, three day, you don't like it, you don't have to pay me. You know I guarantee something like that, I need a job.

Yeah.

So he put me to work and uh, a couple day and uh, call, and after that call me at home. He said: man, next week you can start work five days a week. I said: oh, that's good. You know, then uh, before then I work there, you know, I—I have the old, you know, old tradition, we really respect the elder, right? So I had a old single Chinese man, you know, living in the same small apartment, small—we live in the studio unit, you know, across the hall from me? So every time I do some cooking, I always bring some to him. He said: oh, you know how to cook? I say: yeah, I can—I can cook some. He said: yeah, you did good, you know? Your food taste good. He ask me, he said: you wanna learn to make a cooking? I say: oh, yeah. He says: I work down the first of Pine, and the owner's my friend, you know? The owner was (unintelligible)_____, Japanese.

Oh, okay.

So this old man would—he used to be in Chinese army, the—the Chen Taichin (?) Army, so after war, he went to Cuba, and then he somehow he get to the State, so he get to know the owner—the friend of his. So yeah, I'll bring you over. He book uh, like a evening shift. I'll bring you over and teach you some American cooking, so.

Mmhm.

So I just go over him, like very evening, you know. I don't have nothing to do, I go help wash dishes, teach me how to cook hamburgers, sandwich, you know (coughing)? They even have pizza too, you know? The even have the premade dough, just put the sauce and cheese. So uh, one—one day I ask him, you teach me how to eat (laughing)? You crazy? I said: yeah, you teach me how to eat? I know the flavor and then I can cook, you know? So I watch him, show me how to make hamburger and stuff, so I just listen. You know, the (unintelligible)_____ are like, what they call nanny, the old diner-style, you know? You know, you can order thin chicken-fried steak or whatever, fried chicken anything.

Mmhm.

So, you know, I learn and uh, they have—they have egg, over-easy, you know, breakfast all day—it's, you know, so I watched him how—you know, there's some small window. So after I cook hamburger, and then I watched him. Oh, you put ketchup, oh, you put something on, you know? I said: oh, that's how they eating. So I look up how the way they serve, how they eat, so the—the egg over-easy, medium, scrambled, whatever. So I watch him: oh, you put salt, pepper in egg, they put ketchup on the hash brown, you know, jam, butter on the toast. Oh, that's how they eat. So I look, you know, not just learn how to cook, I learn how to—the way the people serve and eat, you know?

Yeah.

So later on, he got sick, so... the boss said: can you handle the job? I say: yeah, you tell the waiter not to write the ticket, I can't read. I knew the whole menu, the old man taught me, you know, I translate sound in Chinese, or what it is in Chinese and some Cambodian, and have the mark on the can, what they call hamburger, the rock (?) or whatever.

Mmhm.

So, you know, I work with those waiter, and they understand, you know, they all say: oh, he's a good cook. I say: just order and don't write (laughing). So I learn with them, you know, listen. I kinda, you know, kinda memorize all the words and stuff.

Oh, okay.

So later on, the boss said: hey, you did good, you know? I say: I try. So he—he liked me, so when uh, when—yeah and after that, you know, my sister came. So we want to live together, we want to move in the house, so we only have about four-hundred dollar saving, you know? Me and my mom. So I ask him, I said: you know, I—we want to get a house, rent a house where we can stay together, save some money instead of pay separate rent, right? He sa—I said: we short of money. He said: how much? I said: we short six-hundred dollars... for the first month, last month deposit, or whatever. He said: oh, okay, go ahead, take it. I say: I promise to pay you back hundred—hundred-fifty a month. Oh, don't worry. Whenever you have, have, you don't have, don't worry, just take it. It was nice.

Yeah.

So I keep my promise, I paid back hundred-fifty each month and all. And then I get a job at—at the Ivar Salmonhouse: busboy... aAbout two dollar and ninety-cent an hour. And then I got this part-time job, I go to school, take the bus, back and forth. Some time I get off from uh... the busboy job at Ivar, you know, ride a bus to downtown. And sometime miss the bus—I took the number seven, used to be number one all the way up to Beacon Hill—I take the number seven and get off the one-hundred freeway, the last free stop, then I walk all the way up to my home.

Wow.

I had a lot of hard work. And then I work my way up, you know? Ivar and then... I said: man, you know, I have marry and have kid, you know, I don't like people call me busboy (laughing). I said: well, I want to move in the kitchen, you know, talk to manager, put me in the kitchen. You know kinda fry-cook. And then later on, you know, like every Chinese New Year, I always cook up a big meal, you know. I have a friend of mine—a friend of my brother, work at the Rainier Club. I went there, you know, ate like couple Chinese New Year, so... they get to know me. Then one day they have position open in the pantry. They say: you wanna work? I said: yeah. So I talk to the chef, so I went there, he said—the chef: okay, you wanna work? I say: yeah! They didn't have much interview. How about Monday? I say: okay, I'll be here Monday. So I went back to Ivar, I told them, because I've been this better job for me, so I—I leave with short notice. I, after Sunday and uh... I couldn't work here no more, I gotta new job, you know. So I work at the Rainier Club like... thirteen years.

Wow.

And after I work there a year-and-a-half... and then I become the head-pantry. And then, you know, my life was that good—

The head...?

Head pantry.

Pantry?

Yeah.

Okay.

You know, the cold—the kitchen is split in the hot side and the cold side. So I'm the one in charge of the cold side.

Oh, okay.

So that time, you know, I work there and uh... I always do the medium tradition (?), I cook a lot of food, like eight-ten course dinner, family time. So I was living in apartment, and I think the manager likes, you know, my work—I always put my hard, like, you know, everything. Hundred twenty percent! So he saw the way I do stuff—so I try to invite to him. Do you wanna go to my apartment, have a Chinese dinner?

Yeah.

So the chef was there and uh... a few co-workers and the manager show up. And then, I put out eight-ten course dinner. He said: how do you do that in a small apartment kitchen? I said: well, I think I go by my experience, see? So I have, you know, steam, I fry, I cook, I stir-fry, I put up all the—and I kind of impress him. So one day that I got promoted to be the head department, you know? And uh... that time back in the '86, eighty... around '86, so I took the job of head department. And then I get a salary instead of hourly pay.

Oh, okay.

So, it was good, you know, back then. And then after that one year, the manager, you know, took—ask me to go up the office, get the chef. I say: okay. You done, you know, job one year so... this year I give you five-thousand dollar raise!

Wow.

I said—I was thinking, my heart said: geez, I pay two bedrooms, only two-fifty, I got five-thousand a year... that's a lot of money paid for a year-and-a-half of my rent, you know? I said: yes, sir. I don't have any complaint. He said: you happen even? I said: I don't have any complaint, but I really appreciate that, you know. Because, I always kinda created stuff, and that, you know, like I used to be kinda rough—you know, I like do much heavy work... only I work at the Rainier Club, I have the (unintelligible)____, you know, I work there summertime, there's a lot of member that go vacation. We don't serve many people at night, I work eight-hour shifts and five member... eight-ten member—only like other football season, the holiday seasons, is all busy, they have spring.

Mhmm.

So I—I was thinking, it's—those guys, you know, when they have party and come for food, chat, doing stuff. I said: oh, it looks nice, you know? But, I said: oh, since I have a chance of (unintelligible)____, before I became head department, so I went to Uwajimaya and the Chinese store and buy the Chinese cookbook, the one they show all the carving, you know, and the practice. And then—I used to don't have the patience to do small things, sit there, you know? I like to do rough (laughing), running around,

(unintelligible)____. And then uh, when the first time I—I try to convince the su (?) chef, the one—the guy, you know, how to carve ice(?), and bought a book that looks so good. I don't know what—how to start it, I said: hey, Mark, you know? Since slow day, not doing, I try to, you know, talk him into the—hey, how do you do this? You know you start to cut, do the apples, I said: yeah, I got it! How you start it, so I look, you know, practice, they love practice! And the first time I make one rose, and one uh, apple swan, turn out, you know, it's not as nice as chef with a straight (unintelligible)____, I said: gee, I can do that! I have the patience to do that, you know? I could change myself. So I, you know, I do—I keep doing it, a lot of practice and start carving roses, make a bouquet, you know? In the book they only show one or two, small and how they—I be able to create the different stuff. So that I can do one, yeah, I can change. I can change myself, you know? So I do (unintelligible)____, start to practice. And then uh, you know, later on I get to be better than every one of them (laughing).

Oh....!

Yeah!

So, um, when did you... decide to open your own restaurant?

During I work at the Rainier Club, you know? I always tell them dream I have my own business, because we grow up back home they—all family own business, see? Then, when I was in school, studying English and the teacher said: what do you want to do in the future? I said: well, my dream is I want to have a small café, you know? My own, you know, and I can cook. So, you know, during the time I been working myself, and my wife—we have three kid, you know? I working all my by myself, my wife sometime do housekeeping for weekends so, and kids, they small so we watch the kid. I working by myself! So every weekend, I make noodle soup every weekend, you know? So my wife said: well, why you make noodle soup every weekend? I say: yeah, one day I want to open my own noodle place, you know? She said: you don't even have money! I say: yeah, I don't have money, but I keep dreaming, you know? So I—I keep kinda—I'm... you see, when we back home, my old—my oldest brother then make the soup stuff, you know? We know how to do cooking (coughing). But I have the impression what they put in there, so I keep practice, try to get the right flavor. So one day, I and couple friend, you know, over and have noodle soup. Hey, your soup's good, you know, you could open a restaurant. I said: I don't have any money!

Mmhm.

They said: it's good. I say: you think so? They say: yeah, yeah. I say: okay, then I find the right ingredient, you know, the flavor. So I said I work at the Rainier Club then uh, one guy open the racquet store at the old place? They used to be the Canton Won Ton, you know, the other side my old restaurant, and the theater in the center. So my friend say: hey, you know the next door they have the space, you know, you could rent. And then I said: yeah, let's go! Asked the landlord: can I take a look? I look inside, I say: oh, not bad. You know, it's really small place, you know? Tiny place! They have upstairs they can seat twenty-some people. Downstairs seats fourteen when I opened, you know? So it's small place and then I look, I say: oh, they have a small kitchen. Really tiny kitchen! They have a hood. I said: hey, I can save money, don't have to get a hood, you know? And they have three compartments, sink had one soup

stock burner, I say: yeah. I take the tape measuring, talk to the landlord. Well, you want to rent? I charge you seven-hundred dollar money, include water. I say—

Oh..!

Not too bad, you know? So I—that time I—

What year was it?

That time I—yeah! 1987.

Okay.

So that time I save uh... a few thousand dollar, you know I have a few thousand.

Mmhm.

So I had first couple credit card, I went to bank, do cash withdrawal and cash advance some of my money. So one day, my brother's friend that brought me in the Rainier Club. So either one they saw the place so they get me into it and I say: okay, we do fifty-fifty partner, you know? But end up, you know, when I look at the place, I measure the space of the kitchen so I—I go home and I always come back with restaurant catalogue, you know, the curtain? So I measure the stove and things: oh, we can only fit three stoves in there. Two is... three for the soup and one for the, you know, boiling noodle. So I measure up, I sit there right away, you know what I gotta do on it. And on seventh night—that's my first restaurant at Seventh Avenue, exactly where the first road?

Mmhm.

It was uh, the Seventh Isle for the ten years before the collapse, then I – after that five month, I took over the place I have right now. And it did work! So I—after we open, you know, for a while, my partner kinda split off, so I pay him off, so it's got out so I open my own.

Okay. Okay, cool. Um...

Oh yeah, during the time when I open the restaurant? I took a week vacation from the Rainier Club. I didn't let anybody know, you know, only my coworker.

Oh... did your family know?

Yeah! I—I told my wife when I go to rent the place, you know. My wife said: you don't have any money! I say: I think it'll work, I'll figure out some way, you know. I—I bought the all—I go to buy all the equipment, you know, the used one, you know. Old—used refrigerator, I didn't go—I ask people around. They say: yeah, you can sell Pepsi product and you know, you rent the ice machine. I say: yeah, we need an ice machine. So we went to Pepsi company, say: oh, we're going to rent an ice machine, ice maker. And we going to sell Pepsi product so I ask them give me a cooler.

Mmhm.

So we use half of the the—for the drink, so we can use the bottom part for our own stuff, you know (laughing)? And then, you know, we go—I go, I went really low-key. I went to—we look at the newspaper, they have auction. So we go buy the used chairs and the old table, and we partner(?) with the... winer and covered cloth, and we have somebody come with glass top, put it on, make it look clean.

Mmhm.

So, it was very low-key. You know I start the restaurant like—my partner's spent seventy-five hundred, I put up eighty-five hundred total.

Wow.

We get it open. So before that, I told my—I call my brother in California, he work with the... chain restaurant, you know, he work for them, he's a good cook too. I told him: I'm going to open a restaurant! He said: you got any money? I said no. He say: you have a hundred thousand? I said no. I say: I can—I probably can get it work, less than twenty. He say: you kidding! I said: no kidding, you know? So I gotta open, he said—then later on, he told my wife, I said: yeah, he love that. But my wife asked: do you have any money? I said no. How do you own a restaurant no money? I said: I don't know, I don't know. I'll figure some way—make it work, get it work, you know?

Yeah, ah... so and you also talked in your pre-interview about um, your restaurant business in uh, your work in the community which sounds kind of like your father, um, can you talk more about that?

Yeah, I—actually, I did a lot of fund—you know, like fundraising to help with organization, all different lot of organization around here, you know.

Mmhm.

Let it go, okay, ask for donation for some small (unintelligible)____, you know gift certificate or sold (?) food. I always do that. You know, I'm not rich, I can't do big part, I—at least I do small part, you know? Good for community, that's what it count.

Can you say that one more time?

You know, see, I'm not rich, I couldn't do big part in the donate, you know. But I can do, you know, some small thing that's good for the community, that's what it count, right?

Yeah.

And then when we refuse, somebody go ask. I say okay, at least you can do something, you know, not just say I can't do.

Yeah.

You can do something (laughing).

Yeah, like a dollar (laughing)?

No, no, no (laughing, then coughs).

Um... and you also talked about surviving? In our pre-interview, you said, um, you went through a lot of things in life, kind of all it was high and low, but the main thing was survival. Can you speak more on that?

Yes, see... you know in my—in my late teens, that's one of my best time in life, you know. Family gets richer, you know, we live a good life.

Mmhm.

And then uh, when—when the Khmer Rouge took over, you know, we become homeless, so. We learn how to survive, you know, we take—you know, we go through hungry and starving, family, we always handle it. You know, like, anytime we work in the field after, you know, before we go home, you know, we always pick the wild-grown vegetable, whatever, you know, along the way.

Mmhm.

You know? Over there they have lily—you know, water lily. The ong-chou-lae(?), you know? What the Chinese call: ong-chou-lae. The water spinach, whatever they call that—the long one?

Oh... yeah, yeah!

Yeah, they have a lot of wild-grown, you know, whatever living, we take it home, boil it up, share and... And sometimes you know, over there—during the time the youth—you know, they had to—I don't know who has the rice to trade, maybe all the Khmer Rouge, they have the connection. You know, you have to know somebody to use gold to trade for rice, you know? One ounce maybe get ten can of rice!

Yeah.

And condensed milk can. And I—my dad, that time he had couple hundred ounce of—it's all gone. You know and uh, sometime we had to starve. And uh, befo—sometime, you know, they don't send us far away so we stay around the village town. We get food, you know, and at night we share a scoop an each. Even the kids and stuff, they stay together, so... young young kids. And we always feed the kid first, and the adult, then we share whatever left—take, took care of the kids first.

Mmhm.

They don't get full-full, they get share with everybody.

Yeah.

It's still, you know, we don't—never get enough food. And the, you know, you have to learn how to find the stuff, food and... sometime you had to go find and eat like a rat. Field rat. You know, meat? Look for meat? After work, dig some hole and look—sometime we get snakes, sometimes we get rat—we eat lot of rat, man. And the—whatever we got we always share in the family, that's the important thing. And then the, like '79, you know, after the Vietnamese invade... so I had to—we always go along behind the front line, you know, where people run away, you know, we can find food whatever. I—I've been through a huge time to get strouded (?) you know, because too close to the front line. We go get oranges, you know, fruit, mango, all the farm different stuff. So we keep following the, you know, behind the front line... they shot at us few time, ran, survive. You know that time, you don't have—they

don't spend money, spend gold on either rice or trade, you know, that's amazing, rice and gold. When the Vietnamese invaded, they have kind of free market, you know you can trade, you can buy, you can sell. So look—look for like chicken, like whatever—well, it's hard to find chicken running around, you know? People got them all already.

Yeah.

And what-whatever we do, we start, you know, low-key, really low-key.

Yeah.

See when the—when I start the business my wife said: no money. I said: well, I just give the try, and if it doesn't work, doesn't work. We can leave later on, you know?

Yeah.

So it work! I start '87 till now.

That's pretty good.

Yeah.

Pretty successful.

After I open up and have uh... (sniffs) there's a lot—there's a four-five, you know, Cambodian noodle place that open up, they all gone, only me that's first one started and I'm still standing around here, you know.

Yeah.

And uh... I don't care any competition, you know. When someone open the—oh, somebody else open! I say: well, they do business their way and I do my way, you know? I don't interfere with them.

Yeah.

So I just do my way, you know? People like us, they support us. They like our food, they come back. They like our service, they come back.

Um... so you talked a little earlier about going to school at Seattle Central to take English classes?

Yeah, the—the first time I went there, like two or three quarter most, I couldn't remember. So all I remember—I went about five or six a quarter for English class. And then the—the first two-three quarter I went there because I couldn't speak English and then it's—it's hard for me to read, you know?

Yeah. So no—did you have no English at all before coming?

No, only a few words: "yes" or "no" and "how are you", "thank you". And then uh... I quit go school, just go to work (coughing). And then, you know, people like me, I work hard. And then—no somebody: oh, somebody want to do some yard work, you know? I say: okay, I go. Let me firm(?) me one place or I—I do my spare time, you know, do yard work, like-like a half-day off or sometime I have a whole day off,

you know, I work in the yard somewhere for people. I figure out: eh, twenty dollar, you know? One day I can buy a lot of food back then, you know, you can fill up the small refridgerator.

Yeah.

That's all I think of, you know? I feed my kids, you know, it's worth it. And then I hardly stay at home, always at work, and I—you know, you do good job, people refer you one to the other. So I always have a lot of job, I go handle it all.

Mmhm.

And then later on, you know, I spend—I say: well, I need to go back to school, learn some more. Works, you know? I went there for another two-three quarter, then I work in the two-four, you know, one-four tower part-time, the other's, you know, side job.

Yeah.

And I always keep busy. The first six year I came to Seattle, I never have a day off, no vacation, no day off. You know, people want to go vacation, I say: okay, you want me to cover? You know, I can punch in your name, then the company don't pay overtime, then they would be okay. If I punch in my name, you know, they have to pay me overtime, you know? It's no good. So they sign their check to me, so I work for them.

Oh...! Yeah.

A kinda—(coughs) because you work in a part of union, have you—you work more than forty hours there, the company have to pay you overtime. The company wouldn't let you do that. They would deal with the, you know, somebody who run their office, so I work for them until the day switch back for them. So until, you know, I have the restaurant... '87 and '88, you know, start to have vacation. So I take my kid to Disneyland, visit my brother in California. I think—I think my kids, you know, since they small, I think they been to Disneyland more than any kid that—(laughing) you know, from not California area, you know?

Uh-huh, uh-huh.

They say: why you know—why we always have to go to California? I say: hey, it's only brother I have, in California, you know? So I get to see once a year, and you guys can have a good time, you know, in Disneyland all the time, every year!

Mmhm, wow!

Yeah, after I have the business, then I start to take vacation. And I left home... Cambodia '79, it's so—I have first brother here, me, and my sister, and two younger brothers so five us here. So... in 2001, we went back to reunion, the first time, you know? All of us, we left '79, then we went back, because we have the, you know, bad impression of our past?

Yeah.

So it—we write a letter that time, you know, send it back and forth, my brothers back home stops. The first time we went back to union, all my brothers went there, my sister didn't go. And then uh, it—it was a great time, you know, first time we went...

So what year was that?

2001.

Oh!

First time we all went back.

So recently?

Yeah, and uh, after that, I didn't go back till 2004. I took my two daughter there, one graduate from Berser(?) school, and I took here there, and my youngest, and my sister. First time went back after twenty-some year, meet my brother.

Wow.

And '05, six, seven, eight, I went back, like, each year.

So do you enjoy going back?

Yeah, the only uh... happier, I see my brother, it's uh... we all getting old (laughing)! My third brother is sixty.

Oh, okay.

Yeah, it's late fifty.

Okay. Um, so you talked a little about your... daughters. Do you feel that you've made sacrifices during your time in the United States for, like, your children?

Yeah, yeah. You know, I go work. Mostly I left home like 5:30 in the morning. Most of the time I get home around midnight, they all asleep, you know? That's a lot a—most of the time, sometime weekend, but I have to work. Like one job I only work weekday, and some job work weekend late, later, so I—you know, half-day morning, I take them somewhere, you know? Here, there. You know, it's not much time together, see. And uh, like my youngest daughter, one time when she was in high school, you know, she try on the computer, you know, wrote something, for school, for teacher? Said: you know, I miss my childhood somedays. Somebody love me, it's my grandma, that's my wife or... and she always kinda stood it. I said: uh, kind of—my second daughter kind of, playing around, give to me. Well, later on, I told her, you know. I said: you know, maybe all you missing your childhood much, I figure out, you know, you've been to Disneyland more than any kid, you know?

Yeah.

I spend as much time as can be with you. We have to be a family, you know, we have nothing, you know, where we came? I said: you know, now look. You don't—you don't get the first part, you don't get the

childhood, but now? You know, later in the future, you get a lot, you know. We can't—we can't have perfect life.

Yeah.

That's sacrifice some to get a lot, don't sacrifice a lot to get some. And some people couldn't even, you know, make it in life, you know? I said: see, now we have houses, we have nice car, you know? You miss your childhood, but you don't. You get good, you know?

Mmhm.

You don't have worry. That's what the Chinese call: to be the first and the sweet comes later, you know? And for that a lot of work... I think it's my kids good, you know? They're very loyal.

Yeah.

It—they all born here. They speak our dialect, they speak Cambodian too.

Oh, okay.

You know, like—like me? I speak three different dialect: Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, and Cambodian! No conversation I can't end of it.

So how do you... I know that you're from Cambodia, but how do you identify yourself?

See, over there, you know, something is not fair in Cambodia, you know. Like you can't (unintelligible)____, right? You're born here, you can see the US citizen, right? Over there, your parents Chinese, you're born—okay, your Chinese. Vietnamese? Okay, you're Vietnamese, you know? Different ID.

Yeah.

See, back in the—when I was seventeen, went to join the army, you know, join fight the Khmer Rouge? Well, your Chinese, we wouldn't take you. I say: okay, well (laughing). Yeah, I went to join them, in the office, in the recruiting office—

So do you call yourself Chinese?

Yeah, I was born Chinese.

Do you—

And now people ask me: oh, I'm Chinese-Cambodian.

Oh, okay. So do you—

It's not—

-- Call yourself Cambodian?

Yeah, yeah. Cambodian-Chinese or Chinese-Cambodian, whatever you know? I said: hey, it doesn't matter, you know. It's not a shame on—where you come from, you come from, you can't change that, you know? Who you are, you can't change who you are.

Yeah.

Do what you are, who you are, and that's it.

Mhmm. Okay, so we are... (unintelligible)_____ (laughing). Um, okay. So what's... um, what sort of challenges might you have faced if you had raised your family in Cambodia instead—or in Thailand instead of the United States?

Cambodia? Yeah? Well, over there, you know, if you work hard, you smart, you know... kinda—over there it's easy to make money than here, you know? You know, make big shot at money one time, or you just make constant, you know, income, living. You know, over there, you have to use your head, you know, common sense—market up and down, you know, you trade this and that and... since I was late teen, you know. Because m-my dad's a good person, so a lot of people know, you know, he have a good credit. So I—sometime you know, during the war, that time, you know, outskirts, so sometime the road cut off so you find a—okay, the beer, the sugar, oil, you know, liquor, you know, the price—it never go down, it kind of...

Yeah.

So if I find: okay, this guy have this product. You know, over there back in the time, you know, you get trusted, you sitting in the coffee tabletop, just a shaking, no paper. Okay, buy a 100K from you so much. Okay, you sell ten bucks a K, let's say, so I go through the other guy, you know, and know somebody who wants that product say: fifteen . Okay. So I know how to put money up front, say go alone here, a hundred K to that guy, take the cash, over there no credit, take cash.

Oh, okay.

So they bring back whatever left you go in here, you know? It's... you know, it's how we learn business. But not the cheating people, you cheat people one, and they tell no new business with that guy and you done.

Oh...

You did good, you know, you—when you buy, you pay, you owe, you pay back, and you get the credit you be—like here the credit good, they trust you, they let you.

Yeah.

And sometime, you know, when the—when the private arm, then you good customers: hey, the price be this high, so this is all stock, I say: I sell you same price, you can sell to somebody, get some money. You know, I turn around and learn about business, see. Not even just a restaurant business.

So how... for example, your brother—one of your brothers stayed, right?

Back home?

Back home.

Two.

Two of your brothers stayed back?

Yeah, they do good. They've been selling motorcycle parts for twenty-something years!

Mmhm.

You know—how they live in like two-unit together, three story.

Oh, okay!

Now's it only... four people live in a big house like that.

Mmhm.

One husband and a son, a daughter-in-law.

Oh, so (coughing)... so have they done okay for themselves?

Yeah, yeah. They do good.

Okay.

They bought have two-three houses (laughing).

Hmm... wow.

Over there that—after you build a house, and done! You know, they probably pay tax like year. You know, they produce like three, four, five hundred a month. Pay the tax.

Um... do you have any... well, let's check that. Um, okay. Can you tale a little about... do you have any regrets about your journey or about your life in the United States?

No, I don't.

No regrets?

All I do is—no, I don't have any regrets. I'm glad to be here too. But I miss my home, you know. You know, everybody do. You know, where you grow up, you know, your roots there and kinda—but what you, what can you do? 'Cause the country turn differently, you know. So since I came here so long, I—I grow my roots here, so this my home (laughing)!

And... so in what ways are you satisfied with your life here in the United States?

Um... let's see. One, this country, you know, since we came from the country that has wars and stuff. We came here and feel peaceful, we have a lot of opportunity to do what we want to do.

Mmhm.

But like, over there, you do business, somebody coming and rip you off. Government, corrupt, I mean, a lot of corruption. But here, you pay your tax, you okay, you know, do your business. Pay your income

tax, file your income tax (laughing), you know? Over there, you know, they come, they want to eat free or do that, you have to give them money under the table.

Yeah.

It's okay, you know. Like, you know, you had to flow with the—what do you call, you know, a different society, a different lifestyle, you know? You go by the... living by the rule to survive.

Hmm. Um, so, in your opinion, what events either in the past or currently have helped to shape the refugee community? And how?

Uh...

Like can you think of anything that has happened that has made your community what it is today?

That's a hard one, isn't it?

Yeah, we can come back to it if you want.

Hmm. Yeah, let's skip that one. I don't know what to ask.

Okay. It's okay, there's no right or wrong. Let's see, um..

How about the, you know, since I came here in 1980, don't have that many store or shop, you know? Now I see a lot of Vietnamese business or, you know, mostly refugee stuff, you know, long way down to King Way.

Mmhm. Um, when and where does your community gather? Like what—what brings people together?

Well, they mostly go—like the Cambodian, like, party, they go every time where they're like four-five hundred people.

Mmhm.

And they go through Canton, that's where they gather.

To where?

Uh, Buddhist temple.

Oh, okay. Um...

(Coughing) I'm too busy and I've never been to temple...

Really? Never? So what type of things do you go to? That's kinda community—

I don't—I don't know where they like, you know, put in close people, you know?

Mmhm.

Then I go. Otherwise, it's working. I hardly go. I don't like too big of social event.

Okay. Um, what is your favorite memory of your community? Of either refugee community, Chinese community, Cambodian community...?

Well, pretty much, I meet a lot of nice people, you know.

Mmhm.

See like... when I go California, you know, to meet Cambodian community. I don't know. I think the people here spoke more friendly and politely, you know. That's kinda nice. Different, you know, different area, different types of people.

Do you have like a favorite memory remembering of the community? Like something that happened or...?

Pretty much people...

Just something that's your favorite--

Before they're home...? Yeah...

Pretty much what?

Everybody for their own?

Mmhm (laughing).

Well, I... let's see. Well, besides friendly, I don't know what to say (laughing).

I can—

There's a lot of friendly people you know around the community—

Yeah.

Community Cambodian. See that, you know, I own business. I always see, you know, all nice people, hardly you meet any bad people.

Yeah.

Mostly a lot of nice people .

Mmhm. Um, why is the refugee experience important? Why is it important that the Wing Luke tell your story alongside a range of other stories?

I think a lot of refugee come here, like—like me, the first generation, you know. They work so hard to raise a family, you know, give a second generation a good education like what I did. And then, something problem—a lot of older generation... the young generation, we couldn't even support themselves, you know. We support ever y—we've been working to support the whole family, why can't they support themselves? I think, you know, the younger generation here get too much American life, you know, spend too much what they have! We always save, like my parents teach us everything. So in the rainy season, you have to keep some water for the dry season, you know? So you can have water to drink?

Yeah.

That's what we did. I did what they do. Lot of first generation do it all. The second generation—well, they have a lot of success, young people do education, they come up. Like my daughter graduate from business school, work for Starbucks, become a manager for few years... and now she's sitting in the office.

Mmhm.

The—I told her, you know, first... just work in the job and work your way up like a stair. So you been through along the way so you—one day you're sitting on the desk, then just tell somebody something, they respect you because you know what you're talking about.

Mmhm.

You know? Like, I said, you know, I work... a lot different people. Some of manager they don't even know what this job does need done and they keep talking, talking nonsense, you know? You can't do it. If you work along the way, you tell them what to do, how to do it... you know, just not the lead—just not the boss—be the leader and they respect you! You know what you're talking about, what to do, and how to do it. It's different.

Yeah.

It did, you know. And my two daughter, now they want to take over the restaurant. I said okay, you know, they good, they all good.

Mmhm. Give you some time to relax, huh?

Yeah.

Mmhm. Um, how has this area, the Northwest been good to you?

Well, the—mine was, you know, support by a lot of community member. That's why I support the community too, you know, whatever advance, somebody ask to participate in some... how somewhere I do it, a small part, you know, not really a big part, I can't afford (laughing).

Yeah.

I always, you know, say yes.

Mmhm. Okay, so now I'm going to ask you to describe the pictures you brought in...

Oh, you want the—(coughing) okay, that comes later then.

Which—

No, no, that's okay. You go along, it's fine.

Are you sure?

You go along with that, yeah.

Did you want to add something?

No, no, that—that comes later time, we can work along there.

Okay. So... I don't know what the... order—I think this one is gonna be—
Yeah, this the oldest.

Ah!

Yeah, yeah, I found this—I got this picture first time I went back to Cambodia. So my third brother gave it to us, gave it to me. Because I been asking him you have any picture of my childhood because that's about this too, the same—that's all I have.

Mmhm.

And this one, this one's kinda... early teen. So, I went back there and they gave me one of these copies and can you make four-five of them (both chuckling)? So I was so happy because, you know, 1962, I was only like six years old and that—that picture here's me. I mean this... you know, follow the dragon—uh, the lion, you know? Take the tail (laughing)!

So what is the group that you're with in that picture? What's the group who—like, what is, who are the other people in the picture?

Oh, the... my father was the president of the organization and they have my two brother—my two older brothers in there too.

Mmhm.

The e--

What's the name of the organization?

Uh, they call Saing... Saing-Quong? Saing means like a dawn, early dawn. Quong is like a sunlight.

Mmhm.

And the... what do you—they call the music club or whatever, you know, they play the old-time music. They have all variety—when I was about ten-eleven, my dad put me in the old Chinese opera, you know, Cambauoi, I was so scared, see people, you know, shaking up (laughing). I just be the bodyguard, or one of the rich man in the opera, and this night, these picture that we have of our seven brother and sister, they met before my dad went to China, meet his mom the first time.

Oh, okay.

So we took that picture, the... I believe in 1968.

This one?

Yeah.

And which—who—which one are you?

I'm the one over here: the number one, two, three, and then my sister and the fourth brother, and the fifth, and the sixth, and the youngest seventh, then... the youngest one. I'm the—I'm the—

Okay, so you're on the bottom, second to the left?

Yeah. So then you know, the Chinese, so they come and go their separate way.

Mmhm. Mmmm....

So the fifth boy.

Okay, fifth boy, but the sixth child?

Yeah.

'Cause you had a lot of brothers, huh?

And then uh... after my dad went to China, meet the—my grandma once since he left around fourteen years old and that's it. That was the last time they met.

Oh...!

And they never see each other until they all die.

Oh...

So when—when we first came here, my mom find somebody, wrote a letter, send to China to my grandma, so they send a—ask for my dad because my dad already passed away in '78. So my mom tell the man who wrote the letter, he said: oh! He stayed in Cambodia with two—the two boys, you know, and the rest of us here, so it's okay to don't let the... my dad pass away. So after that a year later, my grandma pass away eighty-four years old in China. So this my first brother's wedding in uh, 1969.

Okay.

So this my, um, my dad, my mom, and my second uncle and... the aunt. And the—they have one-two-three-four-five-six-seven... yeah, they have seven kids.

Wow.

And our family, we have eight. Nine, actually. This is my youngest sister. She die at age five or six years old.

Okay.

And this is my youngest uncle. In Cambodia, my father had two brother here.

Mmhm.

And now they all—they all die, you know? So I only have two more uncle in the end back in China, they still alive.

Mmhm.

They around eighty.

So did your ha—dad have two families?

My dad has... see the, two brother there? So he have five boy and a girl and then a family—my dad's the oldest.

Oh, okay.

So I have two younger—the second brother, my uncle? And they have two more younger brother, number three and number four in China. They have a youngest uncle, number five? So the three in Cambodia, they all gone, pass away. Only have the three that live in China still.

Okay. So can you go... kind of from left to right and say who's who just for the... for when we write it?

Mmm, okay. This is my second uncle's oldest daughter, and the second daughter, and the third... daughter. And then the oldest... boy. And the second and the youngest boy.

Okay.

They belong to my second uncle. And this my oldest brother, and the second and the third brother, and the fourth brother, and then me: I'm the fifth boy.

Okay, so you're just the second from the right on the top row.

Yeah.

Okay.

And this my sixth brother and the youngest brother.

On the right, from the left... okay. And your dad is the one your brother's... sitting in his lap?

Yeah, yeah, my dad and mom.

Okay. Then, picture number four?

Yeah, this my mom and my dad.

When was this, do you know?

I think by the late sixties. I think before they go to China, they took the picture. It was black and white, black and yellow.

Yeah, it's a pretty picture. They don't look happy. Um, okay. And this one next?

(Coughing) this picture that be—before I come to the States. That's when the... transfer camp before I come to the United States after we enter the US Embassy and the immigration? They gave me the number of, you know, departure number.

Okay. And then, this one? Er...? Which one is next? This one, probably?

Yeah, it's me.

You in the top right corner?

Yeah, yeah. The picture my sponsor and my—me and my wife, my sister, my sixth brother and the youngest brother shot. And my, my first daughter and my sister's sons too.

Okay. When was this picture taken?

I think '80—late '81 or '82 or something. I think that's around Chinese New Year when we have a gathering.

Oh, okay. Okay, what about this one?

And this my uh... wife and my kids. They went uh, I can't remember what year. What's that say... and years in there?

Mmm-mm. Sixty-six, ninety-nine. No, that wouldn't be right.

Well when the—in their childhood, you know, here's their novel, here's a two-three years ago.

Okay, this last picture of the three girls?

Yeah.

So what are their names?

Uh, the first one: Dawn. Diane and Darline.

Okay, so Dawn's in the middle. Diane's on the right, and Darline is on the left?

Mmhm.

Okay. Um, okay...

Oh yeah, there's one—there's one more thing that I want to say earlier, right?

Okay.

This is a proudest moment I have in life, you know, when I cook, where I work (coughing)? At the Rainier Club, 1994?

Oh, you cooked for him?

When they had a fundraiser. So the—after the—that was like what you call a thousand-dollar dinner plate? So, you know, we—that night I didn't charge the dinner, so, after that, so the secret service women said. I say: yes, ma'am? I said: you want a picture with the man? I say yes! So the kitchen was on the third floor, so we had to go—I had to go down the lobby on the first floor. They say: okay, head down to lobby in five minutes! I say: yes, ma'am, you know, oh! So I go—I was standing there in line with the other people, so the secret service all around, so he walk out of the elevator. So the secret service said : he's the sheriff so we took care of the dinner and stuff. So when Al Gore(?) walk to me,

before I say hi to him, you know, he bow down to me first. You know, thank me for all the wonderful dinners and stuff, so I was like: gee, that was my proudest moment in life, you know? I said in Asia, you couldn't even get close to those people the—talk to them, couldn't even look in their face. So the year before that, it was '93, the year before that, when the aid (?), first aid packet in Seattle? You know when they have a conference at the Rainier Club?

But uh—

So I couldn't get to see the president, you know, the day we go cook, have whole kind, all different department, and we—every police, FBI, or whatever secret service team, US marshal, you could see them all there. It's all—

And what was this? What was it for?

The conference of the APEC.

APEC?

Yeah.

The...?

The—the Asian-Pacific Economic Corporation?

Oh...!

When they have a lot of country and the people there?

Mmhm.

So we cook for them, the... president. So that they, you know, when you go in the work in the morning, you see all the secret service, all different department of the government, you know, everybody is there and dog, everything sniffing around the kitchen. We go in, we get dog sneaking around. It was kinda, you know, (unintelligible)____ that day. And we do lunch, breakfast, and lunch for the president, for the White House there, everybody. So comes lunch. We have to dish up ten... dish exactly the same. And we have four-five, you know, watching what we're doing. So one guy walks over, grabs two plates and that's for the president. I say okay, that's good. So, I was kinda, you know, I—we have a—see since I have the—I'm the head department, I have the... Rainier Club business card, right? So I told the lady who operating the elevator for president. I say: when the president go in the elevator, can you ask him for autograph?

Mmhm.

And she did. She said—the next day they gave me the autograph, right? So I said, you know, I ask. The president say: well, I don't just sign for anybody, you know. Autograph anybody, So he said: where there's one chef that cook your lunch, you know, doing stuff, you want to sit with me? Oh see, sign. And then they—after the lunch, so I have the secret service brought down, you know, champagne and president M&M(?), you know. I still have those in my cabinet, I keep.

Oh yeah?

At home. And then once the—the napkin that have president's seal or something.

Mmhm.

So I got the champagne, I got the—M&M.

Wow. That's cool. And you still get postcards from Al Gore?

No, after he elect office, that's it (laughing).

Oh, really?

Yeah (laughing). I think I still have his home address.

Yeah... did you write to him or...?

No. I said I wait till I finish my book then I send one to him.

Mmhm. How did you get postcards from him then?

Well, that time when, you know, they ask me for picture? And I sent back the picture, because one of the – they originally sent from (unintelligible)_____. So the boss said: you should send it back, ask for autograph, then you picture become valuable, you know? The picture.

Ohhh... yeah.

So I did. I didn't ask anybody to write, what I know, you know? So I ask him, I said: could I possibly get one of your autograph, you know?

Mmhm.

So, he wrote me back this letter, you know, with the autograph, you know?

Mmmm...

This one just reproduct. I have the real, the original one framed at home.

Oh, okay (laughing).

I don't want to lose the original one.

Yeah.

I have Gary Locke's in May here.

Mmhm.

I made from (unintelligible)_____ (coughing).

Oh, you made the food trick?

It was small.

Ohhhh...! This is beautiful. This is from teaching yourself?

Yeah. Actually I teach my daughter to make this one.

Oh, really?

I set up the first one, I cut everything, I said keep following. So that's how she did a good job. We catered one of the wedding and uh... she wanted to learn. So I start first, and then keep going.

Mhmm, yeah. Does she do them herself now?

No, no.

Not quite? That's cute.

I come up with my own designs and stuff.

Yeah.

That's why I restrict (unintelligible)_____ I pay for all the material. And the wood(?) and out there, do the show.

END OF INTERVIEW.