

Chapter Two

Learning and Working in the City

(The 1960s and 1970s)

Just a year before I arrived, my father had bought a small wooden house in Phnom Penh so that his three elder boys could stay all together. Phnom Penh was a beautiful city, with most of its public buildings well designed and well maintained; its multicoloured gardens; and its busy streets well illuminated. But we were living in the poorest part of the city called “Phsar Doeum Kor,” or “The Kapok Tree Market.” The place looked more like a slum than a real agglomeration of the capital. For many years, we had had no electricity and no running water. At night, we used a burning oil lamp to provide us with light long enough to do our homework. We used charcoal that we bought from a Chinese shop next door for cooking. We also bought clean water from any retailer who got it from a distribution point and sold it from house to house in a container placed on a two-wheel cart that they towed while

walking. Of course, in the city, everything had to be bought. Nothing was for free. In the rainy season, we saved some money, as we used the rainwater provided by Mother Nature instead of city-bought water. Two years later, we finally got both running water and electricity.

A Small Wooden House in Kapok Tree Market Place

The house was 4 m wide and 6 m long, and was elevated high enough to leave the open ground as a place for a kitchen and a space large enough to put together, fastened to the columns, two or three handmade wiring hammocks. The wooden stairs led us to the upper part of the house through a veranda of 1.50 m by 1.50 m. The roof was covered with zinc. There was no real bathroom. We bathed in an open shelter of thatch that could only hide just the lower part of our bodies. Inside the shelter, we stored clean water in a used black oil container, exclusively for bathing. We called this facility our “bathroom,” which was installed on the ground 2 m next to the stairs. We

lived in a compound that was 12 m wide and 24 m long, delimited by a bamboo fence. The WC was behind the house at the extremity of the compound. The section where we lived was crowded with working-class people: cyclo drivers, street vendors, factory workers, and lower-ranking civil servants. The hygienic conditions were not always adequate, as worn water did not run smoothly through the open drainage conduits, providing unpleasant odours and a perfect refuge for mosquitoes. At night, we had to sleep under a mosquito net to protect ourselves from mosquito bites.

From the main street in the area, Mao Tse Toung Boulevard, which had not yet been asphalted, we had to take a small but busy 300 m road to reach our house. The road had to pass through an open-air market before it could connect to a small wooden bridge that crossed over a stream full of garbage. The road was covered with clayey soil. During the rainy season, even walking was slippery. The area was also not safe from thieves. Every night, we had to carry our bicycles to the upper part of our house. Doors and windows had to be locked before we could go to

bed, even though we were not living in well-furnished rooms. The most “sumptuous” furniture we could afford comprised one bare cabinet, two tiny tables, a few standard chairs, and one wooden bed with a mattress, in which my elder brother used to sleep. My second brother, Sinoeun, and I shared the remaining space on the floor, enjoying the comfort of our separate handmade mats under the protection of our individual mosquito nets. We practically slept next to our much-loved and indispensable bicycles.

Our Daily Life

Among us, the distribution of household work was such that my elder brother took care of all general issues, from supplies to house maintenance; my second brother took care of food and cooking, and I helped both of them in addition to a specifically assigned task of cooking rice. We cleaned and washed our respective bicycles and clothes on the weekend. When we were busy with our studies, we

just bought cooked food from a small food stall that sold cheap, popular meals to cyclo drivers. Once we had cooked the rice, we usually bought a kind of sour soup with tomatoes, pineapples, and fish or chicken for a meal, costing around USD 0.10 per can and enough for three people. A few years later, I would continue to pay the same price for a more voluminous soup as I became a regular customer and got to know the lady who owned the shop. When we were running short of supplies, one of us would rush to our village, Snay Pol, to resupply with rice, dried fish, sausages, or salted duck eggs from our parents' home. We would return to Phnom Penh with plenty of supplies and some money on the back seat of our bicycle. Each time, we would generally be given the cash equivalent of USD 2 or 3.

To our great happiness, sometimes our father would surprise us by visiting incognito. On such special occasions, he would take us to a Chinese restaurant on Mao Tse Toung Boulevard. We would enjoy better Chinese food the entire time Father was staying with us. Mother rarely came, as she had to bring along my younger sisters

or brothers. But we were not completely isolated from relatives, as one of my aunts' families- one of my mother's elder sisters- lived 200 m away on the same road. So, frequently, my cousins came over to play ping-pong, do their homework, or enjoy relaxing with us in the hammocks almost every afternoon. The homework consisted of mathematics, chemistry, physics, or French language practice. We learned our lessons in the traditional way, inherited from the older generation, which obliged us to repeat, sometimes loudly, the same readings from the courses we got from school until we could remember them by heart. On days close to the exam, our neighbours would hear long hours of our repeated voices reading our lessons. At the time, I was not really a hard-working student. Many times, I fell asleep in the hammock while reading my textbooks. One of my cousins came regularly after lunchtime. When he arrived, he saw me most often snoring with my face under the cover of an open book. He used to joke about my way of learning. He said, "I don't understand how you are going to learn your lessons by sleeping?"

Attending High School

In my high school, Sangkum Reastr Niyum High School, secondary studies were divided into two parts. One part was reserved for classes from grades seven to nine, and the other for classes from grades ten to twelve. My elder brother went to the second group of classes, located in the prestigious area of Phnom Penh in the south, named Chamcar Mon, next to the residence of the Chief of State. More modestly, I had to go north, to the opposite part of the capital, in a popular section named Tuol Kok. Almost every morning, I rode my bicycle at top speed across the busy Mao Tse Toung Boulevard, passed over the URSS Boulevard¹, and continued through Samdech Penn Nouth Street² until I reached the Music School (Faculty of Music), the final site of my destination. In fact, the Music School's building³ was next door to our school.

¹ It is now called the Russian Federation Boulevard.

² Part of Samdech Penn Nouth Street is now called Marshal Kim Il Sung.

³ The music school had moved to a new location.

The school was mostly built with ordinary wood and covered either with fibre-cement or street tiles. The furniture was not quite different from what I had seen in my village, even though the classroom here had electric lights. Most of the students came to school by bicycle, like me. But many came by motorbikes, and some came by cars, accompanied by their parents or only by their drivers. The way the students came to school already revealed the social setting they belonged to. From this point of view, my social situation was categorised in the lower and majority class. Yet my situation was still better than that of many other poor students who had no roof over their heads and were obliged to live with Buddhist monks in pagodas. At the time, there was no class struggle among the Cambodian people. Influenced by Buddhism, we generally believe that class disparity is caused by our past and present deeds, since we are masters of our own destiny; our lives are shaped by individual reincarnation.

In Phnom Penh, many of my teachers were women. They were mostly married to high-ranking officials or wealthy businesspeople. Some couples, husband and wife,

were both teachers. They came to work by car, driven by themselves or by their drivers, except for some school staff. I had not seen any “professor” in my high school come to work by bicycle or motorbike. Any high-ranking official married to a teacher was considered smart, intellectual, and then “chic.” In any case, it was always better than marrying an ordinary woman. Some of my female teachers had been living with their husbands in France for a while before they took the teaching jobs. They spoke French perfectly and were generally pretty attractive women, wearing fashionable clothes. For many decades, France had been the place of our dream, a place to produce our elite. For any woman or man who had been in France, whether for visiting, staying, training, or studying, they always got something more than the others in terms of respect and esteem. Those people were commonly called “Choeung Srok Baraing,” or “French people leg.” If the schoolteachers were popular in the countryside, the “French people leg,” especially the student group, would be in higher demand in the capital. The “French people leg” was so well regarded that some high-ranking officials

or rich businessmen would give their daughters' hands to them. Until 1970, France had been the most visited European country by many Cambodian nationals.

At school, I began the year with difficulty. Impressed by city life, I probably needed some time to adapt. Among forty students, I finished the first semester as the 23rd in the class. But at the end of the school year, I rose to 18th in class ranking. I found most of my classmates more informed than me in general knowledge, certainly taking advantage of being city dwellers. However, I was thrilled to notice that, despite my provincial origin, called "peasant," I beat them in all French compositions. This was unthinkable, as the "French language" should be the language of the "intellectual or smart guys." If the best of my classmates got 11 or 12 marks, I received higher marks of 13 or 14. Many times, the French teacher called me to read from her desk, in front of the entire class, my works that had won the highest rating. I was so proud of my French, although I was not speaking this language fluently yet.

Going Out to Practise the French Language

To practise French, in addition to the way we did at home, from time to time I went to an old part of Phnom Penh where the French community lived, the biggest European community in the country. The location could be recognised by its trademark, colourful and ornate parks and villas or buildings in colonial style. Normally, I could see many French tourists and residents walking in the park in front of Lycée Descartes and in the area near Wat Phnom. Wat Phnom is the hill that gives its name to the capital. Phnom Penh is the contraction of Phnom Daun Penh, or the hill (Phnom) of Grand-ma (Daun) named Penh. Often, I left my bicycle under a big peacock or flamboyant tree, among others planted along the street, and watched for any French passers-by so that I could speak to them with my broken French. I could hardly articulate such expressions as “Monsieur or Madame, comment allez-vous? Où allez-vous?” It was a surprising

but pleasant question for passers-by to hear my Cambodian accent. Sometimes I did not catch the answer, as it seemed to me that the Frenchman or Frenchwoman was talking too fast. But I was satisfied with my exercise. In other classes at my high school, students practised the language directly with their native French-speaking teachers. They did not need to watch for any French passers-by at Wat Phnom, as I did.

In Phnom Penh, our classes were often interrupted by numerous demonstrations organised by the government in honour of foreign dignitaries, presidents, heads of state, and prime ministers of friendly countries during their visits to Cambodia. To welcome those important guests, the authorities mobilised students and schoolboys or girls (youth in general) at the airport or along the streets. Cambodia under Prince Sihanouk had friends all around the world, many coming from third-world countries. Each time, I had to wear a youth uniform. The regime had created a youth movement named “Yuvann” or the “Khmer Royal Socialist Youth.” The uniform consisted of a cap with the golden royal insignia, pants, a long-sleeved khaki shirt

all in khaki, a black tie, and a picture of our “beloved Prince father,” Norodom Sihanouk, which was hooked to the left pocket of the shirt. We had to buy student and youth uniforms from the Chinese shops. We wore the student uniform on school days and the youth uniform on social days. In addition to welcoming important guests, we also had to participate in many political activities, such as mass meetings or demonstrations, which were generally initiated by the youth movement in support of the prince, Chief of State, and in social activities for collective works of general interest.

My Years at the Business School

One year later, my elder brother, Chhoeun, left high school after he had successfully passed a nationwide exam for schoolteacher training. He moved to a village called “Kampong Kantout” in Kandal province to live in the national pedagogic training centre, a boarding institution about 30 km from Phnom Penh, where he would be

trained in a two-year program. But, as always, my brother looked after my schooling. One day, on our vacation trip to the native village, he handed me a large envelope. It contained an application form for an entrance exam to the only business school in Cambodia, the Faculty of Commercial Sciences, now called the Commerce Faculty. I had neither known nor heard about the school. I had no idea about business studies or the job opportunities. My parents had no specific reaction to my brother's suggestion. Business studies were a new subject to us, especially for my parents, who expected their children to earn a living in the government civil service rather than in the private sector.

Job opportunities for any business diploma holder were generally offered in the private sector and rarely in the civil service. Finally, I agreed to apply for admission to the business school. The conditions for the first level of studies required, among other things, at least the completion of grade seven. There were 40 places for 800 candidates whose school levels ranged from grade seven to eleven. The exam comprised a Khmer composition and

a few other subjects that could generate high scores. For preparation, I did not make any special effort, except to revise and memorise some basic calculus. In the Khmer composition exam, candidates were asked to write about a local businessman's activities. Drawing on my frequent contacts with some Chinese shop-owners in Snay Pol, I described a busy workday of a grocer named Chek Seng, or Uncle Seng, an imaginary figure I invented on the spot for the exam. I pictured him as an early bird, always smiling at his customers, running his shop efficiently, and keeping the most-demanded goods always available. Uncle Seng's story was just a made-up story. Ultimately, I remarkably passed the entrance exam, probably with a high mark for my writing work on Uncle Seng.

The 40 successful candidates came from families of all walks of life: ordinary workers, civil servants, high-ranking government officials, and rich businessmen. Among them, I made a few true friends in the weeks after the class began. Two young ladies were there; one of

whom was the daughter of former Palace Minister Ung Hy.⁴ Her name was Ung Kanitha. The other was a relative of a rich businessman. Her name was Keo Sodara. The two came to school in their luxury cars, driven by their chauffeurs. They had attended French schools, one in Phnom Penh at Lycée Descartes, and the other in a boarding school in a seaside resort city south of the capital. Both young women spoke French fluently. Among the boy students, one young man named Oum Muntha, whose father was a city policeman, regularly rode a Japanese-made motorbike to school. He always wore a T-shirt and jeans, and kept his long hair in a hippie look. I was one of the youngest students in the class and found two friends, one named Sun Sarom and the other Nou Vanthan. They were the most senior of the class.

Muntha, Sarom, Vanthan, and I formed a group of close friends. Sarom's father was a veterinarian, so his

⁴ Under the Presidency of HM King Norodom Sihanouk, Ung Hy held the position of Palace Minister in a government that lasted from March 18 to August 13, 1945, with the title of Akka Moha Sena, equivalent to that of Prime Minister, Ministère de l'Information, Cabinets Ministériels Khmers, du March 18, 1945 to March 18, 1970, Phnom Penh, 1970. p. 34.

family had no financial problems. Sarom was gay. At the time, we did not pay much attention to his sexual behavior, except to crack jokes about his effeminate manner. Sarom was always with Muntha. Vanthan was a unique son of an old, widowed lady from a good family. He was not better than me in terms of social standing. Before applying for business studies, he had been a professional boxer. He would go to fight at least once a week to earn a living and support his old mother and his young sister. I was with Vanthan almost all the time, since he was my neighbour, about 300 m next door. He had no bicycle and needed me for traveling, using my second-hand bike. In practical terms, he made the most physical effort. While he was pedaling, I quietly sat behind him. Every morning, before the start of class, our group would go for our habitual breakfast, a noodle soup, in a Chinese restaurant a dozen meters from the school. Each time, Muntha volunteered to pay the bill, and we never refused his offer. Because of his easy way of spending money, we thought of his father's job, a city policeman, as a very lucrative position. However, we later learned that the man supporting his family

financially was an important person: a middle-aged man, not a royal family member, but a high-ranking official of the royal palace. Muntha had a pretty attractive sister, one of the promising stars of the royal ballet troupe, whom the distinguished palace man was courting.

In class, we were learning both languages, French and Khmer; commerce, applied mathematics, accounting, an introduction to civil and commercial law, and economics, among other subjects. Lecturers were mostly experienced executives, high-ranking officials, politicians, or ministers who held university degrees, especially from France. Many were very busy people. In addition to their regular jobs, they wore many hats, teaching at our school as well as in law, economics, or other institutions. Among them was Khieu Samphan, who had become a famous politician because of his close association with the Khmer Rouge leadership. By word of mouth, he was initially famous for the three-wheeled motorbike, a Vespa, which he rode to his workplaces, even when he was a high-ranking official, until he got a second-hand Volkswagen. In his late thirties, he was also famous because of his

confirmed bachelor status. He had already gone into the jungle to join the Khmer Rouge revolution when I arrived at the business school. Khieu Samphan was a special case, as other lecturers would be driven to the school by their uniformed chauffeurs. In contrast, the vice-dean of the faculty showed up every morning with his expensive convertible car. Many students whispered that the vice-dean spent his regular nights in a nightclub next to the central market.

At the beginning, it was hard for me to understand all the new subjects. But at the end of the first year, I became one of the best students. I used to compare my situation with the movement of a solid object that, at first, when thrown into a river, slipped deeply to the bottom of the water for a while, but later, little by little, would emerge to the surface. I was very good at accounting and economics. But what was astonishing again was my superiority over my classmates, including those who had attended French schools, in the French language.

Staring at Lycée Descartes' girl students,

Playing on the Ground

We had a French teacher named Nicole Berrier. From her, we learned French grammar and how to compose business correspondence. After I entered the commerce school, I no longer needed to practice my French in the park. I would converse frequently with my French teacher. Even though we still managed to visit the French section of the city from time to time, not for the purpose of learning, but for sure, just for the pleasure of watching. In fact, during break hours between courses, we usually spent our time staring at Lycée Descartes' girl students playing basketball or volleyball court in their short sports suits, a few meters from the sidewalk. Looking at those young ladies, we were so excited at first sight of their well-formed legs; they seemed so beautiful, so smooth, and so eye-catching. At that time, I was unaware that the girls were wearing transparent tights. In our family, no one used that kind of material or fabric.

Government Grants

At the end of the first year, I applied for the government grant because our family was under critical financial pressure. A few weeks after the second year started, I was informed that the government had decided to grant me a quarterly subvention equivalent to USD 20. On that good day, I was so happy with the good news that I rushed immediately to my native village to tell my parents. Unquestionably, my mother was thrilled by the news, as the grant would reduce our family's burden. When the day of the first payment came, I invited my two brothers, Chhoeun and Sinoeun, to spend time together. Chhoeun travelled from his training centre for the occasion. He had just bought an old motorbike. So, for sightseeing in the city, the three of us would enjoy riding it. We spent the night going out, eating delicious food in a Chinese restaurant, shopping, especially buying new clothes, and going to the cinema, watching Western films. But at the time, according to the traffic regulations, no more than two people were authorised to ride a single motorbike. So, we

rode out of sight of the traffic police. Each time, long enough before we saw any policeman at any street corner, one of us had to get off and walk away until we felt safe from any police watch. The grant was a meagre income, but it did give us great happiness.

In addition to business studies, I managed to spend my evenings learning Chinese. At the time, many foreign embassies, especially the Chinese, German, and USSR embassies, were providing, in close competition, free-of-charge language training courses to Cambodian students. Every night, starting from 8 o'clock p.m., the classes took place at Lycée Preah Sisowath. All the teachers were Chinese nationals from Beijing. They spoke Khmer fluently. Some of them were learning our Khmer language at the Faculty of Letters. I had been learning Chinese for one month, just to be able to write my name and sing a song in Chinese written by Prince Sihanouk, which was translated from Khmer, when the Great Cultural Revolution happened in China and forced all those teachers to return to their country. From that day onward, I never had another opportunity to study Chinese again.

Getting the Number One at the Final Year Exam

The first-level business studies program lasted two years and would be sanctioned at the end with a diploma after an examination. One day close to the exam day, while we were in intensive preparation, Sarom suggested that, to pass the exam successfully, our group should not ignore the power of the spirit guarding the school's compound. Therefore, we should pay tribute and offer him something. The offering usually consisted of a boiled pig's head and some wine or liquor. In fact, the Business School⁵ was situated next to the Place of Buddha's relics and the railway station. In the north, a score of banana trees marked the border of the school's compound. Just a few meters from the entrance gate, a hundred-year-old banyan tree stood impressively. Beneath the tree, a small cabin was erected to serve as the shelter of the school's spirit, which we then called Neak Ta. A family of school workers

⁵ The site of my former Commerce School is now occupied by the Vattanac building.

lived nearby, too. In the past, many students of every class had given offerings to the spirit. So, our group decided not to miss the tradition.

Just one night before the exam, Sarom prepared food and drinks; afterwards, he brought them into the compound. The ceremony took place at around 9 p.m. on a dark night, under the lighting of a bulb lamp. However, it was still dark, as the lamp could hardly light the ground beneath the giant tree. We lit a candle, burned a couple of incense sticks, and each of us made our wishes, one by one. Traditionally, we needed a master of ceremonies for such a non-Buddhist ritual. A few minutes later, we left the place, giving all the offerings, including some unopened bottles of beer, to the spirit, without removing them either. We thought the offerings would serve as an excellent and additional meal for the worker's family, who used to enjoy all foods and drinks left behind after the ceremony. I guessed the worker might be behind the idea of the spirit's power, as he had been living with that kind of practice for many years. In the end, I passed the examination with honours, getting the number one spot among the other 19

lucky candidates to receive the diploma. I guessed I did well not because of offerings to the spirit, but certainly because of my hard work. On the list, Muntha was 3rd, Sarom 5th, and Vanthan 9th. The two other friends, French-educated young ladies, Kanitha and Sodara, failed at the first session and passed the second examination a few months later. In addition to the diploma of business studies, which I also received as the number one candidate at the top of all candidates, the state certificate of accounting studies.

As holders of the diploma in business, we should apply for jobs in nationalised or private companies because, at the time, the government's policy was to provide young people with professional training in response to the needs of those companies for business employees or the workforce. But for me, I was not interested in any job, as my only desire was to further my studies. At the time, the rules required that I apply for a re-entry exam to the second level of business studies. But unlike the external candidates, I had the right to choose a subject that I had learned at the first level instead of mathematics

for the entrance test. I chose accounting, for which I believed I would get high marks. But what was my strength turned out to be my weakness. I failed the re-entry examination because of an error in the accounting test. Consequently, I had to search for a job by myself. Immediately after receiving my diploma, my friends in the group were recruited as clerks or bookkeepers by the state-run Brewery Company called “SKD,” thanks to Kanitha, whose fiancée headed its finance department.

In the World of Factory Workers

By my own efforts, I got a job at the state-run glassware factory on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. I was recruited as an assistant bookkeeper. But I had worked for only one month, from September to October 1968, in this factory. I was earning only USD 40 per month, not enough to pay for daily transportation and food costs. The factory was situated 20 km west of Phnom Penh, too far for me to ride my bicycle. Every working day, I had to take a towing-

motorbike taxi to go to work. As an office worker, I should also demonstrate that I was up to standard. I would have lunch in a private restaurant not far from the factory. I had to wear a clean shirt and pants, with a smart appearance, to arrive at the office early in the morning, at seven o'clock, and to return home at 6 p.m. I worked in the office of the chief accountant, along with two other colleagues: the deputy chief and a cost accountant.

The chief accountant was one of the well-known lecturers in the Business School. He was a French-educated aristocrat who came to work, smoking a pipe, and always sat in the back seat of his French-made car, a Citroen DS, driven by a uniformed chauffeur. He was married to a French lady. He came to the factory only once a week because he worked for many companies, both private and public, as a chief accountant, chief finance officer, financial controller, or auditor. When necessary, we had to visit him at his home or in his other offices to get his approval for what we did. I had heard that working as his staff would have a bright future, but he did not pay a good salary.

Like other state-run factories, the glassware factory was a donation from communist China to Cambodia. Upon my arrival, some Chinese technical advisers were still working there. During the one-month period, I got to know my chief well but never met the chief executive officer, who was a high-ranking government official with the rank of “Oudom Muntrey” or “Superior Officer.” When I submitted my resignation letter to him, my boss said, “Have you really decided to quit? Of course, I cannot afford to pay you more for the time being.” I just replied that my wage could not match the high cost of living in Phnom Penh. However, at the time, I did not ask for the moon. I left the glassware factory at almost 18. At this age, I may be wet behind the ears, but I was well trained to do my job. It was my first experience as a factory worker.

A Job in a Brewery Factory (SKD)

Finally, I applied for a job at SKD, the state-run brewery company, where my friends had been working since they left school. Thanks to Kanitha, once again, I was recruited as a secretary-accountant, or a junior accountant, under the authority of her fiancée. But I was assigned to work in an alcohol distillery on the northern outskirts of the capital, called “Kilometre Number Six” or “Kilo Six.” I had to work in a cost-accounting section with a dozen colleagues who were former students of my business school.

In the new position, I earned double what I had received in the glassware factory. Every day, I had to take a private three-wheel taxi called “Lambretta” from the “Kapok Three Market” to the central market station first. Then I took the same kind of vehicle in another direction to go further to Kilo Six, as there was no direct commuting line from my house to my new workplace. Regularly, at noontime, I returned home for a lunch break that would

last for two hours. On the way back, in the central marketplace, I would spend a few minutes standing or moving around, to buy and taste, in a hurry, some kind of Chinese appetisers prepared with cooked pork offal that some Chinese vendors were selling on mobile stands, during the few-minute wait for the departure of the next vehicle. After having two or three mouthfuls, I jumped on the “Lambretta” and made my way home. We had two work sessions a day: the morning from 7 a.m. to noontime and the afternoon from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

While working, I still wanted to Further My Studies

After a few months in the distillery factory, I was finally transferred to the headquarters in Phnom Penh. While working, I still held the same idea of furthering my studies. I arranged my schedule so I could attend evening courses to prepare for the final degree in accounting. I went to a private business school named “Institut Commercial” located in the same compound as Lycée

Voltaire, attending evening courses in various accounting studies. After two years of preparation, I finally took the examination for a "Certificate of High Degree in Accounting" delivered by the Business School or Faculty of Commerce. The exam consisted of written and oral tests. To my surprise, on the day of the oral test, I had Ing Phourin as my examiner: my former boss, the part-time chief accountant of the glassware factory. When we were face to face in the closed-door room, he first asked me, "Are you Ieng Mouly?" as if he were recalling past memories. To which I replied, "Yes, Sir." Then he ordered me to choose one of the many folded papers in a box containing the test subjects. In 1970, I obtained my certificate, which was the final degree in accounting in Cambodia, and it gave me the idea to continue my studies in France.

Looking Forward to Studying in France

The idea was reinforced by the fact that when you held any kind of diploma from France, you would always be well considered, well regarded, well respected, and well paid. But my wishes were clouded by the political situation in Cambodia, as the country had just plunged into political uncertainty following the March 18, 1970 military coup.

At first, having no hope of leaving the country in wartime, I decided to look for an alternative. I chose the distance-learning method. I wrote to some institutions in France, and their replies were the same: I must get my diploma recognised by the French Ministry of Education before I can be accepted in any French establishment. But the process of diploma recognition must be the business of both governments: Cambodia and France. To this end, I made many contacts with some officials of the Business School to obtain the necessary information on how to obtain this recognition. No one was able to provide me with clear answers on the issue.

After many months of fruitless efforts, on January 22, 1971, I decided to write directly to Paris to the Ministry of Education, explaining my purpose and the studies I had completed in Cambodia. I was reasoning, in particular, that once any French establishment accepted my enrollment, I would continue my studies until I became a Certified Public Accountant while working in Cambodia. But month after month, I did not receive any response from the French authorities. My hope in distance learning was fading day by day.

I Wanted to Be an Independent Accountant

In the meantime, I was thinking of becoming an independent public accountant in Cambodia. At the time, there were no specific regulations governing the status of public accountants. But, to my knowledge, not long before, many experienced accountants, especially Vietnamese nationals, had been recognised by a commercial court as independent accountants. The practice was that public

accountant candidates should register their activities in a professional list with the court. Once registered in the list, the accountants would be able to work independently. So, in 1971, I applied for the same status at the Phnom Penh Commercial Court. But maybe at the age of 21, I was too young, and the president of the court, whom I had met many times, just replied that he did not know any rule governing such registration.

My desire to become an independent public accountant was finally vanishing too. But I hoped against all hope that, in the end, I would find a way to advance my professional career. I began to search for professional associations in France for help. Finally, I found two or three addresses. I wrote to one association named Société de Comptabilité de France (SCF), telling them what I was doing and asking which professional category I should belong to. I applied for its membership, providing them with detailed information outlining my professional activities. In fact, in the last few years, I had not been at the bottom of the ladder anymore. Three months after I was recruited as a secretary-accountant in SKD, I became an accountant.

By 1971, I had accumulated enough professional experience to look for a brighter future. I had left SKD. I was now working as a confirmed accountant in a Scandinavian group of companies and earning triple what I had earned in my previous position. The SCF, by its letter dated August 24, 1971, informed me that its board of directors had decided to admit me in the category of the "Qualified Accountant's Member" "Membre Comptable Qualifié" of the society. This qualification was very important to me, but at the time I did not realize its value. I was so happy with the qualification, which again aroused my desire to further my studies in France.

Yet, I did not know that the French authorities had responded to my letter of January 1971, almost one month later. In fact, a letter from the French Ministry of Education dated February 11, 1971 allowed me to be enrolled in the French "Institut National des Techniques Economiques et Comptables." But the letter ended up in the dusty piles of papers on the desk of SKD's chief of personnel. Not sure that my mail would get through to my home address, I exchanged correspondence with the French ministry using

my SKD's office address. Unaware of the contents of the French letter that had been sent to me a year before, I renewed, in 1972, my request to have my diploma evaluated for enrollment in French universities or institutions. At the time, I enjoyed writing and exchanging correspondence. This time, unlike previously, the French Ministry of Education asked me to support my request with an official document detailing the program of studies conducive to the completion of my degree in accounting. Once again, I contacted the same officials at the Business School, but they were still unable to satisfy my demand. I could no longer rely on them. One idea came to mind: I should produce the program myself, detailing exactly all lessons learned, and send it to France. Using a typewriter, I worked my way to obtaining the document I needed. With the assistance of a faculty worker, I had my program officially sealed and sent to France. By its letter dated November 20, 1972, the ministry allowed me to prepare the probation examination for a "D.E.C.S" or a "Diploma of High Accounting Studies." This time, all hopes were renewed. Again, I could revive my dream of becoming a CPA.

One week after receiving this good news, I visited SKD to see my friends and former classmates, who were still working there. Upon my arrival at the entrance of the building, the chief of personnel, calling me by name, invited me to come to his office. I was surprised to see him behaving very friendly toward me. While I was entering his office and not yet seated, he showed me a letter from France and handed it to me. I looked at it. The letter was dated one year earlier, February 1971, and was addressed to me by the Ministry of Education of France. It was in this way that I learned one year later that the French authorities responded quickly to my letter. If I had received this letter on time, I would not have wasted my time waiting and fabricating the program paper. The chief looked leisurely relaxed. He did not realize how much his behavior was hurting me. I left his office, deeply disappointed.

Changing Situation

Since the beginning of my professional life, many events had happened in our family circle. My elder brother had been sent to teach in a primary school in one of the remote provinces of the northern part of Cambodia, in Preah Vihear Province, bordering Laos, in an agglomeration named Kampong Sralao, a village near the Lao-Cambodian border. From time to time, he would come to visit us, bringing with him some smuggled goods he could find in the border area, especially French liquors or perfumes. Working in a remote area gave him special credit and priority to apply for the next posting in a better place. Therefore, by 1970, he succeeded in being transferred to a school situated a dozen kilometres from the capital, almost a first-class posting. My second brother, Sinoeun, got a job as a clerk in the national bank, while continuing his law studies at Phnom Penh University.

Our small house had been renovated and raised higher so that the lower part could be arranged as a real

ground floor with full walls, appropriate lighting, and a running water supply system. By the third quarter of 1970, the war's effects began to have real impacts on our lives. Immediately after the coup in March 1970, Cambodia was divided into two parts: one was under the control of the Lon Nol government, and the other was under the Khmer Rouge, which was called the "maquis." The "maquis" was, at first, mostly in a small, remote area, but little by little, day after day, it expanded to cover the eastern and northern parts of the country.

In my village, Snay Pol, local authorities of the former regime had left immediately after the coup. We found no policemen, no district officials, and no other civil servants on active duty. Many schoolteachers had left, too. My mother, along with my sister Vanny and my four youngest brothers, Vuthean, Vuthoeun, Vuthea, and Sophear, had moved to Phnom Penh since April, leaving my father, my sister Sithan, and two other brothers, Vannak and Naroeun, to stay in the village. We had expected that the war would not last long. In our minds, the move of the half family to Phnom Penh was simply temporary. But a few

weeks after the departure of my mother, a couple of combatants in black uniforms, using the name of Prince Sihanouk, made their appearance in the village, coming by motorbike from a remote area. They rapidly set up, in the name of Prince Sihanouk, a new administration in the form of a "District Revolutionary Committee." The district committee would organise, at a later phase, commune and village revolutionary committees.

One of my two uncles, my mother's youngest brother, was selected to head the district committee, with the same authority as the district chief in the Lon Nol administration. My uncle was one of the Cambodian textile technicians who had been trained in China in the 1960s. Accused of being "red," he had been jailed by the Prince Sihanouk regime for many years. In fact, he was not a communist; he just had good connections with some "intellectuals" of socialist thinking. A few months before he struck the coup against Prince Sihanouk, General Lon Nol had released all political prisoners, expecting that they would support him politically. My uncle was among those released prisoners, but, by the irony of fate, instead of siding with the Lon Nol

government, he chose to join the maquis in my native village, Snay Pol. He was appointed by the new revolution to serve on the district committee when the eastern part of Cambodia became a safe maquis.

Once the new revolutionary administration was put in place, the village was cut off from the capital, as the Khmer Rouge banned any contact with any enemy zone, including the capital, Phnom Penh. Consequently, one half of our family was separated from the other. We lived without contact with each other for quite some time. My father later told me that during that time, which lasted almost one year, he made many attempts to sneak out of the village. In one attempt, he succeeded in escaping the control of the Snay Pol village committee. However, the authority of the neighbouring district caught him as he reached the last checkpoint. He was ultimately detained for a night.

Probably to assure the local Khmer Rouge authorities that he would not escape anymore, my father decided to marry my youngest sister, Sithan, at the age of almost 16, to a schoolteacher. The wedding took place in the absence

of the other half of the family. At the time, the Khmer Rouge-controlled administration was still seeking support from the people. They allowed the wedding to proceed in a traditional way, although freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and freedom of religion were gradually restricted. Buddhist monks began to receive political indoctrination, helping to mobilise the people to support Prince Sihanouk in his struggle against US imperialism and Lon Nol, their “lackey.”

The new revolutionary youth was first encouraged, before they were forced, at a later stage, to join the “Sihanouk Army.” As in other maquis areas, the anti-Lon Nol government propaganda was so effective that many young girls and boys volunteered to join the Khmer Rouge army, to the point where holding a gun and wearing black pyjamas was in-style fashion. Many young people would take their picture in a black uniform for their souvenir photos. It was probably because of this propaganda, too, that my sister preferred to get married and continue to live in the village rather than join the rest of the family in Phnom Penh.

A few months after the wedding, my father, along with my two brothers, finally succeeded in escaping, travelling by boat and making up as fishermen. Their journey was very dangerous, as the Lon Nol forces attacked, firing missiles or dropping bombs from fighter jets on any target they suspected of being an enemy. My father's boat was under heavy shelling, too, but maybe, in the end, the pilot of the striking plane realized it was a small fishing boat. The day they arrived, my young brother, Vannak, was covering his face with a krama. When I looked at his face, I saw that it was all burnt, giving me the impression that he had been injured in the airstrike. We were shocked at the first sight of the black, burnt skin that covered his youthful face. A few minutes later, we were assured that the burning had been caused by an accident rather than by the consequences of the war, when the boy was playing with gasoline and an oil-burning lamp. I was so happy with the arrival of my father and brothers, even though our joy would be greater if we were all reunited, including my sister, Sithan. I took the next day off so we could all go out

and eat good food. Fortunately, our house had just been enlarged to accommodate more newcomers

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Marrying My 1st Elder Brother

For quite some time, we had been looking to marry my older brother, Chhoeun. We had been waiting for my father to conclude a deal. His presence among us now gave momentum to the idea of making it concrete. Just before my father arrived, my brother had already chosen his future wife. He often talked about his former classmate in the teacher-training centre: a schoolteacher of his age named Sinath. Finally, my father had no problem with the choice. One month later, we officially married them. For the wedding, I was in charge for the drink supplies, as I had a connection within SKD, which was the exclusive agent of all imported liquors. Through my network of friends, I got special prices for any choice of wine or liquor. We had chosen rum mixed with iced soda water as the principal drink. The banquet took place in a restaurant in the old

marketplace called Phsar Chas. My second brother, Sinoeun, invited two French nationals who were his French teachers at Lycée Preah Yukanthor to the wedding. One of them, named Guy Tardy, filmed the ceremony with his 16 mm cinema camera. The film was very popular when it was shown later to some wedding guests. My brother Chhoeun was very good at public relations because, immediately after his wedding and through his network of friends, he succeeded in having his wife, Sinath, transferred to teach in the same school.

Our house became more crowded with new comers: my new sister-in-law, her mother, and her two sisters. The war made our living harder and harder. More and more refugees were coming to live, mostly concentrating in Phnom Penh.

Working in Private Companies

In February 1971, I left my work and my friends at SKD, as I had just found an interesting job at a dairy

factory of a Scandinavian company named Sokilait. In fact, after the coup against Prince Sihanouk, the Lon Nol government implemented an anti-Vietnamese policy, a kind of ethnic cleansing policy, forcing the entire Vietnamese community to leave Cambodia. Many Vietnamese were arrested and sent to the transit camps before they were repatriated to Vietnam. The hunt for Vietnamese nationals was so violent that any Vietnamese found outside of the transit camps would risk his or her life. Because of this fearful situation, one day, Guy Tardy, the French teacher who had a young and pretty Vietnamese girlfriend, asked Sinoeun and me to help evacuate her from their apartment in Phnom Penh to a safer place. We agreed to help. One afternoon, we decided to accompany him and the Vietnamese girl in the Frenchman's car to Neak Luong, a town situated on the Mekong River, known as the Vietnamese base in the east, about 40 km from Phnom Penh. We asked the girl to wear a sarong so she would look like a Cambodian woman. We asked her to keep quiet and not say a word when asked by police or military guards at any checkpoint. We were very lucky, as

we had passed through all the checkpoints and reached Neak Luong without difficulty. The girl was finally very happy to find her relatives. She said goodbye to us with a profound expression of gratitude. We returned safely but late, at night, to Phnom Penh.

It is also because of the hunt for the Vietnamese that many Vietnamese professionals, including some accountants working in Sokilait, had left the company as well, leaving some positions for Cambodian nationals to fill in. This is why, I got a new job as an accountant in Sokilait.

In the new company, I learned new ways of doing business because we were completely in the private sector, which required effective performance to compete with others. Compared to SKD, which was a state-run enterprise where people seemed more relaxed, spending time going out or chatting endlessly, our work in Sokilait was more productive, and the company's working style was always under time pressure. Even though the way people worked in SKD was already much better than in government offices, Sokilait had to be run in accordance

with international standards, as the company was a multinational with shareholders from Denmark, Australia, Sweden, and Cambodia. The head of Sokilait's parent holding company was a Danish national. He was the Consul of his country accredited to Cambodia. The Consul was appointed chairman of the board, with Cambodian and Swedish vice-chairmen. The Danish and Swedish were mainly in charge of management, while the Australian took responsibility for the production, maintenance, quality control, and the research departments. I liked the Australian team very much, as their engineers actively participated in hard work in the same way as the ordinary Cambodian workers. The Cambodian engineers would stand aside, giving only instructions or recommendations to the workers rather than getting involved in physical work.

I was recruited to replace a Vietnamese accountant because the Cambodian chief accountant of Sokilait, named Lon Mean, who was one of Lon Nol's relatives, was looking for a young and experienced Cambodian accountant with a hard-working spirit to join his team. The

team was finally composed almost entirely of former Business School students. The chief accountant spent most of his time doing more public relations than real accounting work, as the company dealt with the government and its agencies on many issues, starting with bank overdrafts and import-export to price compensation.

Under Prince Sihanouk's rule, there were no private banks. The Prince decided to nationalise the country's banking system, leaving no place for private banks to operate. After the coup of March 1970, some private investments were brought into the sector, but Sokilait continued its daily business with the same government-owned bank. The Danish-dominated company had chosen a pragmatic way of operating in Cambodia. Like the Chinese businessmen, the company would bribe bank officials. One of them, Sokilait, was working with the Khmer Commercial Bank. Because of its excellent public-relations exercise, Sokilait always obtained huge amounts of overdrafts, or could easily extend the terms of its loans. In addition to cash facilities, the company was also in a permanent need of preventing any difficulty with the

authorities in importing equipment or raw materials, as well as in exporting finished products. The company maintained very good relations with the Ministry of Commerce, as the ministry was in charge of administering product pricing. Sokilait was successful in obtaining government compensation for the difference between the market price, which included the fast-growing inflation borne from the burden of war, and the price of milk products fixed by the government. Normally, after government officials had checked with the company's cost accounting section, leaving a reasonable margin for profit, the price of the products was fixed. Every day, the Ministry of Commerce made public the prices of all consumed products, including the price of milk, which was rising constantly. If the ministry acknowledged that the market price was higher than that fixed by the government, the latter would compensate the difference to Sokilait, which, to my knowledge, was the only lucky company that received such favourable treatment from the government.

With good personal arrangements with the concerned government officials and their connivance, the company

would not only obtain a good price but also be safe from inflation. Good arrangements also made the payment of the price compensation faster. So the better their relations with the government were, the better the company's interests were served. Lon Mean was very good at his public relations exercises. Probably using Lon Nol's influence, he had many personal and friendly relationships with high-ranking officials, including the bank's top executives and many ministers, especially successive ministers of commerce. The chief was well supported by the company's top management of the company, who allowed him to withdraw large amounts of money to pay or entertain government officials. The company had a marketing department; one of its tasks was to promote the products in the market. The department employed a dozen young women as hostesses, wearing beautiful uniforms. Many of them spoke English and French perfectly. They were either educated in French boarding schools or abroad. Among them, there were two or three Cantonese or Taiwanese young women who were employed just to lure the high-ranking government officials, especially

ministers. To those young women, the company had granted special benefits for the beauty and service they provided to entertain the Cambodian VIPs.

Talking to Each Other Through Dictionaries

After I had been working for six months, the chief accountant was replaced by a Danish national who spoke only English, in addition to his mother tongue. At the time, I could only speak French and Khmer, not English; I needed an interpreter to communicate with my new boss. The company recruited one. The interpreter, who spoke good English, was a young Cambodian who had no experience in finance and accounting. Many times, I did not understand the chief's instructions well because the interpreter could not explain them correctly to me. To improve communication, the chief and I decided to use two dictionaries: French-to-English for me and English-to-French for him. Each time I needed to explain something, I opened the corresponding page of my dictionary and

pointed to the English words for him. The chief would do the same for me with the English-to-French words while both of us were making a resolution to study the needed language, French for him and English for me, within one year. We bet that after one year, each of us should speak and understand our respective learning languages. From that day on, I spent my late evenings learning English on my own with books and a tape recorder. I listened first to the tape and then repeated after the lesson until I was able to pronounce the English words correctly. Finally, the goal was met. After one year of intense learning, I was able to understand the language quite well, but not to speak it fluently yet. We did not use dictionaries. However, a new problem was arising, as we had to struggle with each other to speak the language we had learned. When I spoke to him in English, my boss replied in French, or vice versa. It was a very good experience. I kept a close friendship with the chief accountant.

During that time, I discovered that I had a good memory, so I could remember any data I had just read for a long time. I responded quickly to any question my boss

asked, whether about the numbers, the amount of money, the categories of accounts, etc. I was also good at learning foreign languages. I had studied Italian through books and a tape recorder until I was able to write letters to some Italian universities to request their documentation. But I was not persevering, as I was doing many things at the same time. After a few months, I abandoned my Italian studies, which remained so limited.

The Tax Officer Asked Me If I Was Ready

Just before he left, Lon Mean, the former chief accountant, was kind enough to allow me to work extra time as a part-time accountant in two small Phnom Penh branches or agencies of the same French mother company, whose regional office was based in Saigon, Vietnam. One branch was situated next to Sokilait; the other on the prestigious Norodom Boulevard, not so far from the Independence Monument. So after regular work, I spent my breaks, evenings, and almost all my weekends

working for the French company. At both branches, I worked directly under a Frenchman who was the director of both. Once a month, a senior accountant would come from Saigon to check the accounts. They had the same problem as Sokilait did after the departure of the Vietnamese personnel. For more than one year, they had not updated the accounting and were two or three years late in paying taxes. I had to put order in all files and managed to ensure regularity with the taxation offices. In fact, for the regularisations, it was not as complicated as when our system of administration was so corrupted. It sufficed to negotiate with the officer in charge how much money we had to pay him to obtain the official regularisation of the situation. At first, I knew that the system was corrupted, but unlike Lon Mean, I was a babe in the woods when it was time to play the real game.

One day, I asked to meet the tax collector, whose official title was "tax controller," to submit the company's purchase and sale book records so that the added-value taxes could be determined and payment could be discussed. The day we met, the officer asked me to show

him the book and said, "Everything is ready?" I replied, "Yes, sir," thinking of the work I had done. But the officer kept asking the same question while leafing through the pages of the book, looking for something else. I did not understand his language. In fact, "Everything is ready?" meant "Did you put any envelope inside?" And the officer did not find the valuable envelope despite my answer, "Yes, sir." So we could not conclude our deal that day. I had to come three weeks later with an envelope full of money inside the book. This time, it was very quick. In a few minutes, we had agreed on almost everything.

Having a Bank Account at Crédit Lyonnais

In those days, I was very busy. I kept burning the candle at both ends. I did not see my parents, my sisters, and my brothers while they were living with me in Phnom Penh. I earned money just to feed my folks and distant relatives who had been crowding day after day because of the war, and to face the rising inflation that was outpacing

our income. By 1971, I had saved enough to buy a Japanese-made motorbike, a Honda PC50, which was mostly used by women because it was very easy to ride and the cheapest among all the categories.

Later, I succeeded in opening a bank account in France. I was so proud to hold a chequebook in French Francs of the Credit Lyonnais, sent from Paris, while I was still living in Cambodia. In fact, I had only a few hundred French Francs in the account.

Comin Khmer, the Last Company

I Worked for in Cambodia

In September 1972, I received a new assignment to work for the mother holding company named “Comin Khmer” in the newly set-up department called “Electronic Data Processing” department, or EDP, headed by a US-educated Cambodian named Leas Chanthon, no longer in the accounting department. I heard that Chanthon was

one of the best Cambodian executives. He held a bachelor's degree in business administration and was close to the Scandinavian top management. He was behind the reform and reorganisation of the company's departments.

My new workplace was on Kampuchea Krom Boulevard, one of the busiest boulevards in Phnom Penh, much closer to home than Sokilait. By that time, I had already stopped working part-time for the French company because they had ended their business in Cambodia while the war was intensifying throughout the country. My new position was "EDP controller," the only position in the company. My job was to control the codification of all documents before they were processed by computers. During processing, if errors occurred, I had to identify and correct them. I also had to check all final computerized documents before distribution. In fact, Comin Khmer was among the most modernised companies in Cambodia, equipped with its own electronic system using punch cards. We called it the "System of 80 hole-cards." Later,

just before I left for France, the company introduced disk-system computers.

I worked in an office with a software programmer named Phan Soriyasy, who had just returned from France. He was clean and well dressed. Our two desks were initially arranged so that we would sit face to face. But Soriyasy asked me to change the arrangement so that his desk would be at the back of the room and mine next to the door. I agreed. But I read his thoughts: "This guy thinks I might have some contagious diseases that could contaminate him." In fact, I was so skinny because of hard work and probably malnourishment. I had dark skin that made me look like a person of African origin. Soriyasy finally became one of my closest friends. Our office was between the punch-card room, where a dozen young ladies were working, and the boss's office. Almost permanently, we were visited, not to say disturbed, by both sides.

After a few months in the new position, the company sent me to take a test for "software programmer" training organised by the local branch of IBM. I passed the test and

attended the evening courses to learn a programming language called "GAP" for the IBM 360/20 computer. Immediately after the result was announced, Soriyasi told me about his intervention, saying, "I have recommended to IBM that you pass the test" (?) Anyway, I must believe him. At the end of the training, I was able to write some accounting programs. On June 29, 1973, I passed the exam for the completion of the courses organised at the Chamber of Commerce, and I obtained the certificate issued by IBM-Cambodia.

Despite my new job in a new discipline, I still remained attached to my accounting studies. I continued to look for distance learning within French schools.

To face inflation and respond to the increasing need for cash during wartime, Comin Khmer was authorised by the government to issue bonds with an attractive interest rate. In addition, they organized a lottery that gave high prizes to the bondholders and the winners. The operations were very popular and successful, as customers rushed to buy them. The company became a financial place where both rich and less-rich people came to invest.

Unannounced Strike

The ground floor of our office was always crowded with customers and completely invaded by them on lottery day. As smart as a fox, the company leadership succeeded in settling the financial problem the company was facing, but they failed when dealing with social disorder, as years of war had taken their toll. One day, in the middle of heavy work, a colleague in the finance department told me that all the gates of the company, in and out, were closed and locked because the Union of Workers had ordered a general strike. I was very surprised, as we were not aware of the existence of any union within the company, and more surprised not to have received any warning notice before the strike started. In fact, the government had just authorized the creation of a Union of Workers, headed by a US-educated advisor to President Lon Nol for certain political purposes, as factionalism was growing more and more. When Cambodia changed the regime from a Kingdom to a Republic, Lon Nol had made himself President of the Republic. He arranged a presidential

election in 1972, and he was elected. The strike had interrupted all company activities. We were just gathering inside our offices. The top management spent their time talking on the phone with different government officials. The chief of personnel tried his best to negotiate with the newly appointed union representative to end the strike, but with no success. I did not reach my brother, Sinoeun by phone at the national bank, despite many attempts; so our family did not know that, since 3 p.m. I had been practically detained and locked up in our office. We did not have a phone at home. No hot news about the strike was reported by the national TV or radio. Only late in the evening did my parents realize I was missing. Fearing for my safety, my elder brother, accompanied by his wife, drove their motorbike and rushed to the company building, only to notice that we were locked up inside. Just a few minutes after his arrival, the union representatives had received an order from their headquarters to end the strike and release all workers. After 10 p.m., we went home, and the incident was closed. Throughout the incident, I did not understand the reason for the strike, nor did I know the

result of the negotiations that led to its end. Nevertheless, the incident made me return to the idea of leaving the country again. We discussed my initial and revived project to go to France seriously within our family. All agreed I should go.

Finally, I decided to go to France.

Many students and young professionals succeeded in obtaining Cambodian or foreign government grants to study or to be trained in different skills abroad. But I decided to go on my own. I saved enough money to buy an air ticket. In preparation for my future life in France, I wrote to the SCF in my capacity as its active member, asking them to help me find a job in France. The SCF kindly advised that I must apply for work once I was in France, as employers could not interview me elsewhere.

To be allowed to study in France, I needed authorization from the Ministry of Education, as the ministry had to certify the correctness of my request and

the possibility that I could afford to further my studies. After a few steps, thanks to my brother, Sinoeun, who had some friends in the ministry, I got the authorisation. At the time, any Cambodian travelling abroad had to obtain a Cambodian exit visa first; otherwise, foreign embassies could not issue an entry visa. I had no passport or identification card. I decided to proceed by applying for those documents at the police department. The police department, especially its immigration bureau, was the place of heavy bureaucracy and corruption. But thanks to Sinoeun's connections, we simply followed the ordinary administrative process, which took more time than doing it through bribery. One of the police inspectors in the immigration bureau was a close friend of his. I used his influence to obtain my ID card, my passport, and the exit visa. In the last step of the process, before the exit visa was signed and officially sealed, I had passed through at least 20 desks where my case had been reviewed, checked, rechecked, controlled, and inspected. Normally, ordinary customers had to pay or give a present to the officer in charge at each desk. With the Cambodian exit

visa and the formal authorisation from the Ministry of Education, I obtained an entrance visa from the French embassy.

Marrying My Second Elder Brother

Just one month before my departure to France, another important event happened in our family. Sinoeun was going to marry. Unlike my elder brother, Chhoeun, Sinoeun did not know his future wife long before the marriage. In fact, my aunt, Samedy, had initiated the idea after many months of careful watching of her neighbours, with whom she cultivated an excellent relationship. A district chief's family was among them. The chief held a middle-rank position, but his grade was very high, up to "Oudom Muntrey." He was a quiet person but very agreeable to talk with. His wife was very intelligent. She came from a high-class family. Her father was a very well-known medical doctor. She had a brother named Huot Sambath, who had held ministerial positions in the past.

At the time of the coup d'état in March 1970, Huot Sambath was the Cambodian Ambassador to the United Nations. Since then, he had joined Prince Sihanouk's exiled government in Beijing. By the time of Sinoeun's wedding, Huot Sambath was one of the Prince's exiled ministers. But the family maintained a close relationship with Lon Nol, too.

The district chief had a young and beautiful daughter named Tepthida, who was still attending the French Petit Lycée next to Lycée Descartes. My aunt and the chief's wife were good friends and agreed that Sinoeun should marry Tepthida. My aunt talked to my mother, who in turn talked to my father. Finally, everyone was satisfied with the choice, except that the two interested parties did not know each other. Before the conclusion of the engagement, my two brothers, Sinoeun and Chhoeun, tried their way to see how pretty Tepthida was. They went to the Petit Lycée, sat inside Sinoeun's car (Sinoeun had just bought a second-hand Russian-made car, the Muscovite), looked out at the school's gate, and waited for Tepthida to appear at the end of her class so that they could watch her carefully. For

Sinoeun, it was love at first sight. For nearly one week, my two brothers enjoyed watching Tepthida from inside the car. Finally, the wedding took place just one month later. For our family, it was an important and last social function they could have before everything collapsed. Many high-ranking officials attended the banquet at one of the big restaurants in Phnom Penh, "La Lune," or "the Moon." Sinoeun and his family-in-law had many friends among high-ranking officials. My brother had joined the "Democrat Party." He became a board member of the party, which was an official opposition to Lon Nol rule. Sinoeun was listed as one of the brilliant young members of the "Democrat Party" leadership. If the "Democrat Party" were to govern Cambodia, he would be appointed to a ministerial position. After the wedding, Sinoeun moved to his parents-in-law's house, bringing with him half-empty luggage.

My Last Days in Cambodia

I kept working in Comin Khmer until I resigned and was released from my duties just a day before my departure for France. My mother had prepared some dried food made of beef and pork, fearing for her son's starvation in a faraway country. My father looked after every detail, including clothes and luggage, and recommended not to forget fifteen kilos of rice. It was August 5, 1973, when the day of departure arrived. My father asked me to come to him, burning three pieces of incense in his hand. I bowed down three times before him and before my mother so that they could bless me, according to our tradition. Chhoeun prepared hot bathing water for me. He made me feel very comfortable. Sinoeun took care of my air ticket and all administrative arrangements: my passport and visa. But the flight was delayed until August 6, 1973.

On the final day, I bowed down again three times before my parents to say goodbye. It was the last time I paid respect to my father. Chhoeun prepared hot water

again for my bath. It was his last act of affection to me. The airport was crowded with passengers and well-wishers to see their relatives off. Many were crying to see their loved ones leaving. Except for Sithan, all of my brothers and sisters, as well as my parents, were at the airport to see me off. At the age of 23, I left Cambodia with less than USD 300, 15 kg of rice, some dried food, and some clothes. Once I slipped into the aircraft, I never saw my father or my four brothers, Chhoeun, Sinoeun, Naroeun, and Vuthean. At the time, I did not realise that the trip would take me away for almost 20 years before I saw my country again. I never thought that Cambodia would become a theatre of unimaginable and unthinkable tragedy through which millions of innocent people would die. I never thought that the Cambodian revolution would be the costliest in the world and the most destructive one for our nation.

This section of my life marks my first struggles to overcome hardship. The love of my parents, my family, and the spirit of brotherhood were most resourceful to me. It helped me tremendously to keep my strength. I never

forgot this precious experience from the early phase of my life.