

Chapter Four

My Parisian Life

(The 1970s and 1980s)

My First Time on the Plane

From the doorstep of the aircraft, I waved goodbye a hundred times to bid farewell to my well-wishers. Once I stepped inside, I did not realise that this moment was the last time that I saw my father and my four brothers, who would later die under the Khmer Rouge's regime. I also did not realise that it would take me more than 20 years to see my mother and my country again. A young and pretty French woman showed me to my seat. She was one of the two hostesses who were standing at the entrance gate to welcome passengers. To my surprise, I was told to sit next to one of the sons of the former chief of my native district. As it was my first trip by plane, I did not know how to fasten the seat belt. Haughtily, I did not dare ask my neighbour how to do it, but my

neighbour was friendly, knew how to fasten the belt, and fastened it for me. I was among a group of passengers who were supposed to take a UTA flight from Phnom Penh to Paris the day before. But for an unknown reason, the UTA flight was postponed. So, the new schedule required us to fly from Phnom Penh to Bangkok, where we had to spend a night in transit, before catching the UTA regular flight the next day. Ultimately, an Air France Boeing 707 brought us to Bangkok. My neighbour was among the other passengers flying straight to Paris.

When we arrived in the Thai capital, it was already late in the afternoon. After clearing immigration and travel procedures, we were transferred by minibus from the airport to a hotel in the city. At the time, Bangkok airport was still small, not yet sophisticated or modernised like it is now. The journey from the airport to the city seemed long, as the road was not so good and there were not many big buildings along the way yet. Along the way, we could notice some wooden houses and pagodas. For me, there was not much change of scenery, compared with Cambodia.

We were provided with food and accommodation at a hotel named Mandarin, located not far from Chulalongkorn University. Staying in this hotel, I discovered for the first time what is called a luxurious way of living. Before, I had never had a real bedroom or a real bathroom. After dinner, many of my traveller-mates went out for sightseeing or dancing in some nearby nightclubs. In contrast, I went straight to my room. I wanted to fully enjoy the comfort of the hotel's furniture. To tell the truth, it was the first time I had taken off my clothes for a real bath, although the beginning was hesitant, as I was shy about my nudity. In Cambodia, we used to wear the "krama" when taking a bath. It was also the first time that I could lie my entire body on a real bed with a mattress, blanket, and sheet. I even used the bedspread as a blanket. At breakfast the next morning, I noticed that many other Cambodian travellers were experiencing the comfort of a luxury hotel for the first time, just like me.

Like me, they did not know how to sleep properly in a bed with a mattress and a blanket. Others didn't know how to use the air conditioner and complained that the room was too cool, etc.

But they all joked about these first experiences and missteps. So, breakfast time became a joyous moment. In fact, most of our group was made up of middle-class students, not to mention working-class families. A lady with two small children, probably married to a Cambodian diplomat, seemed familiar with that way of living. She also seemed to enjoy our company, laughing at us all the time when jokes were made.

When we got back to the airport for our longer flight to Paris, the lady advised us on how to check in and clear immigration. Normally, a Thai hostess, a well-dressed and made-up woman, accompanied us. She explained every detail of the process, but we did not understand it well. In addition, passengers had to pay the airport tax. I did not have the correct currency to pay the tax. So, the Cambodian lady paid for me with her own money. I owed her a debt of gratitude not only for the money she gave me for the airport tax but also for her generosity and friendship. To my great regret, however, I failed to ask her name and address. She has remained unknown to me until now. She might have died or survived under Pol Pot as well.

On the plane, I enjoyed the air service, food, drinks, and many stopovers in different countries before we arrived in Paris. Happy with the comforts of air travel, I had no idea this flight would bring me to a new, far-away world. My real adventure began when a hostess announced the next landing in France. Through the microphone, she said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, now we are flying over Zurich. In about two hours, we will be landing in Paris." It was at that moment only that I was genuinely concerned about my final destination. In fact, I did not know where to go from the airport. It was August 8, 1973 (8/8/1973), a date easy to remember, when we arrived in France. We landed at Paris-Orly airport, as Charles de Gaulle did not exist yet.

My Adventure in Paris

At the immigration desk, I just filled in the form, copying the same information as one of the Cambodian traveller-mates. After all procedures were cleared and the luggage was collected, I moved toward the airport exit, following every step of a Cambodian

student my age. The student seemed to be a regular traveller and to know Paris well. He told me that this was not his first trip. His brother, two or three cousins, and friends greeted him. While he was waiting for his brother's car to take him to the city, I asked him for help. Despite some hesitation and shyness, I decided to ask him for an address on a list. I showed him the address of one of my neighbours in Phnom Penh, Dr Sou Nem, a medical doctor who had obtained a grant from the French government two years ago to further his specialised studies in medicine. The address read: 2, Villa du Bel Air, 75012 Paris. I asked the student whether he knew this address or could explain how to get there.

The young man and his relatives not only knew it well, but they kindly offered to take me straight to Dr Sou Nem's home. I was so happy with the offer that I hurried up to jump in their car. The group was nice to me. They tried to make me feel comfortable while I worried about how to introduce myself to Dr Sou Nem, as I had never met him in person or spoken to him. The group rendered me a great service. They brought me to the doorstep of my host's apartment. Once again, to my great regret, I failed to

ask for their individual names and addresses. They have also remained unknown to me until now.

When he opened his door, Dr Sou Nem did not expect my coming. Luckily, his wife recalled a conversation she had had with my father just before she left Cambodia three months earlier, when he said I was planning a trip to France. It was a surprise for him. Pleasant or unpleasant, I was not so sure. But Mrs Sou Nem was very friendly. She came along with her husband. Smiling, she called me by name and made me feel at home, even though we had never met before. She invited me to come in.

Dr Sou Nem's apartment had a living room, three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a small kitchen. In the living room, five or six men in their thirties were playing cards. They were fortunate trainees who benefited from the French government's grant to further their studies in France. They were mainly Cambodian medical doctors, like Dr Sou Nem, who needed to specialise in different medical skills. Mrs Sou Nem introduced me to the group, who paid little attention to my presence, as the game greatly enthralled them. After having a short chat with me, Dr Sou Nem

rejoined the group, leaving his wife to take care of me. I went straight to the kitchen, where I dropped off my luggage, including 15 kg of rice and some dried and salted beef. I spent a few moments with Mrs Sou Nem, telling her the latest news from Cambodia. As it was lunchtime, I helped my host to prepare the table. In fact, there was no table. Because the apartment was crowded with guests, we took our lunch in the living room, on the floor. I helped her cover the floor with used newspapers, on which we put the dishes. The entire group stayed for lunch. I joined them too. After lunch, some stayed to play cards, some took a siesta, and others left. As a newcomer and the most junior, I helped Mrs Sou Nem do the washing up.

Dr Sou Nem was in his late thirties. With his dark skin, like Lon Nol, he was taller than the Cambodian average. He was healthily corpulent but not really fat. He was a popular figure among the Khmer republican community in France. He had a very useful connection with the Cambodian government. He was one of the Cambodian elites loyal to Phnom Penh and fiercely anti-royalist. I did not know exactly what his specialised training was,

but I could tell his seriousness when he did his homework. When not studying, he spent his spare time alone consulting cards or playing them with his friends. He also liked gambling with the “Tierce,” the French horse-racing game. For this, he studied carefully many specialised sports newspapers. He knew from memory every name of the best horses. In addition to his training work, Dr Sou Nem was very busy with other businesses. His telephone rang continuously for many reasons: friends arriving in France, the venue of the next card party, a social function at the Cambodian embassy, help with paperwork for newcomers, etc... His friends visited him many times a day, from the early morning to the late evening. He had a very good relationship with his neighbours, as there were no complaints about any disturbance.

Mrs Sou Nem was in her early thirties and was smaller than her husband. She was not of a prime beauty, but she had a real Cambodian look, with her smile and charm. She was a real housewife, doing nothing else but taking care of her family. As a good talker, Mrs Sou Nem had many stories to tell. She also spent a lot of time talking on the phone. She quickly took me in, and we

became friends and close associates in our joint household work. She had come to France three months earlier to join her husband. Dr and Mrs Sou Nem had two young children, one boy and one girl. The girl remained in Cambodia, while the boy, the elder child, lived with them in France at age 5.

In the kitchen, I spent my spare time on my first day in France learning how to take the “metro,” the Paris subway, studying the metro map carefully so I could get around the city right away. In Cambodia, I had planned to go to the “Préfecture de Police de Paris,” the Paris immigration office, the day after my arrival to apply for the resident permit. But in reality, the immigration process was complicated. Not only did I need to know how to travel within Paris, but I also needed many supporting documents, such as proof of financial resources, accommodation, and school certificates, before I could apply for the permit. So, my plan, outlined in Cambodia with a detailed schedule, could not be implemented immediately.

Another major issue remained: my permanent accommodation, or a place to stay for a longer period. Dr Sou Nem

and his wife were kind enough to welcome me, but there were no rooms or beds available in their house. However, one two-bedroom was not fully occupied, and one might be available in the next three days. In fact, one of its occupants, a Cambodian computer science student, was leaving. The other occupant was a high-ranking official. The student would move to a city north of Paris. When I arrived, he was enjoying his vacation. He would return the next day to pack up his belongings and move out definitively. So, exceptionally, I could spend my first night in France, in his bed, and afterwards I should find another place to sleep, at least, for the next three days. Finally, it was arranged that I would stay with the Sou Nem's family for the first day and night; I would move to a hotel for three days, and then I would come back to re-occupy the place for a longer period of time.

On the afternoon of that first day, Dr Sou Nem helped me deliver mail and gifts I had brought from our family's friends in Cambodia to their relatives in different places in Paris and its suburbs. Dr Sou Nem knew most of the recipients. He drove me in his second-hand car to several destinations. We spent several

hours in the car, crossing or zigzagging through the busy streets of Paris, which ultimately made me sick. Because of the sickness, I could not enjoy the sightseeing of the beautiful capital of France that my host was offering. Dr Sou Nem seemed happy to provide such a kind of service. To me, he acted like a big brother. When we got back home, the dinner was already ready. Like a good trainee, I helped Mrs Sou Nem again until we finished the household work. Because of the time difference and jet lag, I could not open my eyes. I fell fast asleep. I was peacefully and totally dead to the world.

The next morning, I woke up early, at around 6 a.m., while the other occupants of the house were still deeply asleep. After a hot shower, I decided to go outside alone. I wanted to tour the area, which was so quiet at this early hour, except for the occasional sound of cars passing by. I walked down a little bit of Villa du Bel Air and immediately turned left to finally reach Boulevard des Vincennes. I didn't dare go far, fearing I would get lost. I noticed very few activities, as the real and busy life of Paris would begin a few hours later.

A bakery had just opened 20 m from the house. Some people, not many yet, were coming to buy bread and croissants. Other shops along the boulevard were still closed. The streets were busy, but not much traffic yet. I was surprised to see water coming from the sidewalks, as that was how the streets in Paris were cleaned. I was really feeling like a stranger in the city. Of course, I was a foreigner coming to a foreign country. Everything was different from Cambodia, even the smell of the garbage and the kitchens, which took me two or three days to get used to. At first, I was very impressed by the immense socio-economic infrastructure I had not had the chance to see before: streets, avenues, boulevards, highways, bridges, subways, other communication networks, electricity and water supply systems, etc. The contrast was extreme, as I came from a poor country currently at war and from a city with no security, where power supplies were interrupted every hour. I quickly concluded that those infrastructures were fundamental to development. They were nonexistent in many developing countries like Cambodia.

When I got back home, Dr Sou Nem and his wife were eating their breakfast. I joined them by bringing some bread I had bought from the bakery. The French bread was so tasty that I could eat the whole stick. After breakfast, my hosts suggested taking me to visit some of their friends and some open-air markets in Paris. So, I went out again until we returned home at lunchtime.

In the afternoon, the computer science student who was supposed to leave me his bed came back from vacation. His first name was Bell. He came to pack his luggage so he could move to a city named Compiègne. Bell was older than me. He was kind enough to train me right away on how to travel on the metro. We bought some tickets and a city map, especially the metro line map. We travelled underground until I could recognise the different lines of the train system and know how to catch the connecting trains. In the end, I took advantage of the free movement to look for a hotel room so I could stay for the next three days. We found a single room available in a hotel named Terminus de la Porte d'Orléans. The room was small. It had a single bed and a "toilet," a place to sleep and to take a shower,

nothing else. I finally spent my second night in France in this hotel. I did not bring my belongings with me, as I would continue to come to Dr Sou Nem's house for lunch and for dinner. From the day we first met, I had not heard from Bell anymore.

I finally settled my accommodation problem by living with Dr Sou Nem's family. I still needed to resolve the issue of a residence permit and find appropriate ways to support myself in France. In Cambodia, I got a French visa with only a three-month limit. I believed that if I had a job, I would earn some money and I would be – I was quite sure – allowed to stay for a longer period. I needed to find a job quickly. I needed to justify my income when applying for the residence permit. In addition, my finances were running short. A week after I arrived, I had already spent half of what I had. Not only did I spend most of the money on hotel accommodation, but I also bought many items and services, including transportation tickets, stationery, clothes, and cooking utensils.

For most items, I didn't buy them for myself; I bought them for my family in Cambodia. As gifts, I packed and mailed them to

my parents, sisters, and brothers, along with my letters. To tell the truth, I could not resist the appeal of shopping. I found everything new and useful, which made me think about the shortage of goods in Cambodia. Thinking about the shortage, I became homesick. I wanted to send them everything I had found in abundance. I was right with my love for my folks, but I was wrong with my pocket.

At First, I Must Find a Job

Decisively, I had to seek a job. The first step to follow was to contact my professional association, the French Accounting Society, or SCF. I had written to the SCF, asking for help, when I was in Cambodia. They advised me to come in person so that employers could interview me. So I did. I went to its headquarters, hoping to get assistance. But the association could not do much for me at the time, as I was searching for a job in August, the month of vacation. I forgot that most French people were on

annual leave. Offices were rarely open. The advice I got then was to wait until September to get in touch again. Consequently, I had no other choice, even though my need for money was increasingly pressing. While waiting for the SCF to find me a job, I ventured to knock at the door of any CPA office I found on my way. I decided to go door-to-door. I began in the area near my home. Many employers replied, "We don't need any additional staff." Some said, "You should ask your embassy for a job."

In mid-September, I went back to the SCF. This time I was luckier. A lady in her late fifties, Mrs Charlot, head of the association's employment section, received me. She quickly found the letter I had sent from Cambodia asking for a job, and my personal file. She looked at the job offer list, and she said, "You should work in Paris." To get a job immediately, I told the lady I was ready to accept any position, even a demoted one. I had been a confirmed accountant in Cambodia, but now I was willing to accept any position, including the lowest one, aide-accountant or an aide-bookkeeper. Mrs Charlot made three phone calls to arrange three appointments for me. She was so kind as to explain

carefully where to go, how to take the metro, from which station to which station, whom I should meet, and what time I should arrive at the meeting place. She was acting like a real mother. She called me "mon petit" or "my little boy." At the time, there was no unemployment problem in the accounting profession. Besides, I did not place any conditions on my employment.

My first appointment was for a position as an aide-accountant in a CPA office. After the interview, I was told to wait for a decision, which would be communicated in the next few days. The second appointment was also for a position as an aide-accountant in a travel agency near the "Palais Royal" in the first district of Paris. The address indicated that it was not far from the Louvre Museum and the Tuileries Garden. Travelling on the metro, I got off at the Palais Royal station. From the station, I walked down the sidewalk along Louvre Street. After crossing the first street, I continued until I reached the street I was looking for, rue de l' Echelle. At the corner, there was a bank with its yellow sign, "Change." On the right, immediately after the bank, I found the travel agency at 2, rue de l'Echelle, with a sign, "Pharos France." Apparently, number

2 seemed to be my predestination; for example, I was born on November 2, as stated in my official birth certificate. I was living at 2, Villa du Bel Air; I was looking for a job at 2, rue de l'Echelle; and the interview I was seeking was the second one.

The travel agency was family-run. It was small, with fewer than ten workers, but quite busy. Through the glass front door, I could see two young ladies talking to their customers, while a young man spoke on the phone nearby. At the back of the room, seated at his desk with the desk lamp on, a middle-aged man was reading his files. When I introduced myself to one of the two young ladies, the one wearing glasses, she first recommended that I take the stairs on the right-hand side to the accounting section on the first floor. But, acknowledging my timid movement, she asked her client to interrupt the discussion just for a moment so that she could accompany me upstairs. I learned a few minutes later that the young woman's name was Antoinette. She was one of the big boss's two daughters; the young man on the phone, Richard, was her husband, and the man at the back,

Melatos, her uncle-in-law. Melatos was a former Greek lawyer holding a doctorate in law.

Antoinette quickly introduced me to a group of three ladies; afterwards, she returned to her work. One was her mother, named Helene Amiel; the other was her aunt, Mrs Melatos. The third person, Mrs Debaize, the youngest of the three, a lady in her first forties, was the head of the accounting section. She was supposed to interview me. But instead, she briefed me on what my work would be if I accepted the offer. She also briefed me on the agency's activities. Mrs Debaize managed the accounting section, with two aides. One was Mrs Melatos, the boss's sister. Mrs Melatos handled general accounting and sales accounts. The other aide, Mr Jesua, was reaching retirement age in the next few months. Jesua worked as a cashier and handled relations with the banks. He was absent when I was interviewed. Mrs Amiel, the spouse of the big boss, a Greek-born woman, came from time to time to lend a hand to the section, especially to follow up on money collection. When necessary, Mrs Amiel could speak with Mrs Melatos in Greek, as both women spoke it fluently. Mrs

Melatos and Mrs Amiel's families had lived in Greece for many years before they moved to France.

My job would be to assist the head of the section in all of her work, from recording business transactions, account reconciliation, tax and social declarations, and money collection to producing the yearly balance sheet. In brief, I should do what the head was doing. Of course, my work would be under her supervision. I could perform all those tasks, except for tax and social declarations, as I needed to study French tax and social legislation first. For this, Mrs Debaize suggested that I learn the work on the job. The travel company was offering me a salary of FFR 1,400 per month. It was the lowest salary in the accounting profession. For me, it was enough to begin my new life in France. So, I did not hesitate to accept the offer. At the end of the talk, I was asked if I could start immediately. I asked to report to work the next morning so I could prepare properly.

To close the deal, I was finally introduced to Georges Amiel, the company's CEO. He was in his mid-fifties and of a Mediterranean type, wearing glasses and speaking two or three

more languages in addition to French and Greek. The CEO just shook my hand and congratulated Mrs Debaize and me for the quick conclusion of the deal. He warmly welcomed me to join his staff.

Mon Petit

I left Pharos France, the travel agency, full of hope and happiness. On my way to the metro station, I bought a new tie on the spot for almost FFR 10, as the one I brought from Cambodia was awfully out of fashion. I did not rush to get back home or to continue to the third interview. I had decided to work for the travel agency; I must not change my mind. So, I entered a brasserie, ordering a shandy and a French ham sandwich. It was the best lunch I had had since arriving in France, not to mention the daily Cambodian dishes of the Sou Nem family.

When I arrived home late in the afternoon, not many people were there yet. Mrs Sou Nem was, as usual, in the kitchen

preparing some dishes for dinner. She did not know what I was doing every day outside the home. She never asked or investigated my activities. She did not expect me to find a job so quickly, especially an office job. To support themselves, most Cambodian students who came to France on their own, without any government grants, usually worked in Chinese restaurants as waiters, cleaners, or dishwashers. Normally, as non-immigrants, those students had no right to work. When I told her that I had just got a job as an aide-accountant in a travel agency in the first district of Paris, Mrs Sou Nem was so excited. She jumped up. She was full of joy. She said, "Mouly, you are great. If I were your mother, I would put you on my head and carry you." To share the burden of the household expenses, I pledged to pay FFR 200 per month, which she accepted straight away.

The next morning, to the big surprise of the other occupants of the house, I went to work wearing a tie and suit, in sharp contrast to what they were used to seeing: me washing up dishes. Many of Dr Sou Nem's friends, born with a silver spoon in their mouths, did not believe their eyes, as they used to regard me as a

poor guy, good only for being a cleaner. Now, they were beginning to realise that I was one of the resourceful people.

In my workplace, I was rapidly adopted by the ladies of the accounting section, who, like Mrs Charlot of SCF, called me “Mon petit” or “My little boy.” I worked, once again, very hard to earn my living and to gain the trust and confidence of my superiors. I performed all tasks assigned to me by Mrs Debaize. From time to time, I replaced Jesua to do some work, such as going to the banks, especially to the one next to the Opera Theatre. I built a strong relationship with the team in the accounting section. During lunch, the ladies prepared their meals in a small kitchen next to the office. I preferred to walk several streets, enter a brasserie in the area, and have a sandwich and a beer for lunch. Since I started my job, I had spent my money carefully, as I did not have much left for the remaining month of September. I spent most of it on necessary or unavoidable items such as metro tickets and food. In addition, just before I began my work, I had bought an overcoat in anticipation of the forthcoming winter. Two days before the end of the month, I was running short of money. That day was

not like my ordinary day, as I did not go to the brasserie for my usual lunch. Instead, I bought a single sandwich, with no drink, from a street vendor on the sidewalk, outside a mall named "Magasin du Louvre." I smiled at the vendor when I opened my purse and gave him the last coin of Francs. I only had FFR 5. The man responded with a reciprocal smile, understanding that this was my last penny. In the afternoon, before I left the office, I asked Mrs Debaize for an advance of FFR 200. My team leader did not understand why I needed money just two days before my first pay arrived. Finally, to my great relief and pleasure, she gave me the advance as requested.

French Authorities Said I Was an Illegal Worker

I really enjoyed working at Pharos France. But my happiness in my work was short-lived. It wasn't because I had problems with my boss or co-workers, or because of my working conditions. I had a big problem because of my legal status. As a non-immigrant, I had no right to work in France. I had no social security card, no work or residence permit. Mrs Debaize realised I was an irregular worker, as she couldn't compile my personal file, which should be based on those administrative documents. In principle, French labour law punished heavily any employer who recruited and employed an illegal worker. But my employer took a risk. They were so generous as to keep me working and help me regularise my situation. Luckily, I was allowed to continue my work as a non-declared staff member, moonlighting, until I got proper authorisation to become a regular worker. During this period, I was paid cash, with no records. At one time, they told me to hide in the kitchen and shut up all day while French controllers inspected the company and searched for social security verification. To help me

obtain my work permit, my boss, especially the ladies in the accounts section, prepared a signed contract for me, which I would use to support my application. I was assigned to take steps to regularise my situation in accordance with immigration regulations. The task was not simple.

Under French law, a foreigner wishing to work in France must obtain a signed contract with an employer and an immigrant visa from a French embassy before entering French territory. Once they arrive in France, they should apply for both permits: a work permit and a residence permit, which the immigration office and the Ministry of Labour would issue. My case was quite the opposite. I had entered French territory with no signed contract and with a non-immigrant visa. In addition, my job was classified as a protected profession that cannot be offered to foreigners. At that point, my chances of success were slim. Now, I understood why many of my fellow compatriots had ventured to work in hiding as dishwashers in some Chinese restaurants. I also understood that, because of the difficulty of getting a work permit, many Cambodian nationals, who had no financial resources, agreed to

be repatriated rather than face jail or starvation. A closed circle of procedures existed. The immigration office would not issue a residence permit to me if I could not justify my resources. I could not justify my resources if I were not allowed to work. I could not work if the French immigration office did not authorise me to stay in France.

For me, it was clear. I needed to stay in France; there was no question of returning to Cambodia while the war was going on. The work permit was a life-or-death issue. I decided, with determination, to get it.

Seeking Political Asylum

The Prefecture of Police, the French immigration office, had scrutinised my case since I applied for a permanent resident permit. In the past, I had only been given a provisional permit, pending a final decision. No permanent resident permit meant no work permit, no resources, and certain repatriation. I could not

wait any longer. This time, I went to the Prefecture of Police, with my heart in my mouth. When I arrived, I was given a waiting-call number. Unlike other applicants, I sat nervously while I waited. In the end, as expected, a French lady, the official in charge of my case, told me that I had no right to work in France. Instinctively, I showed her a handwritten note I had just prepared while waiting for my turn in the waiting room. I was asking for political asylum in France, strongly believing that only with refugee status could I break the procedural deadlock. I raised a few but reasonable motivations for my claims, based on the fact that I belonged to an opposition party in Cambodia.

In a few lines, I told the French authorities that I disregarded the Lon Nol government as my legitimate government, and that I did not recognise the Khmer Rouge-dominated royal government of Prince Sihanouk in Beijing. The lady left me for a while and came back, after consulting her superior, giving me another provisional permit while my request for refugee status was under consideration.

I endured my difficulty alone. I did not tell anybody about my trouble or my claim for political asylum in France. No one around me, including my hosts, Dr Sou Nem and his wife, knew about my approach or my decision. They continued to believe I was the best and rarest young Cambodian who had succeeded in getting a regular job, working comfortably in an office. However, I did write to my family in Cambodia about my problem with the French authorities, regarding my work and residence permits. But I did not mention asylum. I wrote many letters to my father and my two older brothers.

In my first letter, just after I arrived in France, I told them about my first flight and how the Sou Nem family received me. It took five days to send a letter from France to Cambodia and one week to send one back. So, we exchanged our correspondence practically every two weeks, telling our respective stories. Through the exchange, I knew that every time my letter arrived whether the letter was sent to my father or to either of the two older brothers, it would end up at our “Kapok Tree Market” house for the whole family’s gathering, where someone among the children, my

younger brothers, would read the letter they took as a precious message from a loved one thousand of kilometers away. When I told them that I had gotten a job, they were full of joy and happiness. Generally, they were convinced that I was really their only hope. I began sending them some money since I had the chance to work. When I told them about my difficulty, the whole family was completely depressed. I knew that they were living in a harder condition, in a country at war, where life and death were daily concerns. So, I should not bombard them with bad news.

I spared no effort to claim refugee status. I visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the French Office for Refugees (OFPRA) several times, where I made my official deposition. I explained in more detail the main political reason that supported my claim for refugee status. I based my claim on the fact that I belonged to Chau Sau's group, which had expelled In Tam from the Democrat Party. Now, In Tam had become Prime Minister of Lon Nol's regime. He might use his power to put our lives in danger. Consequently, I chose to oppose the two enemy governments, the Lon Nol government and the Khmer Rouge-dominated government

of Prince Sihanouk. I wrote to Madame Nicole de Hauteclocque, the widow of the late Marshal Leclerc of France, to ask her for help in settling my case. Mme de Hauteclocque was a deputy, a congresswoman from Paris. During this time, I was very often absent from work, but my supervisor, Mrs Debaize, and other colleagues understood my situation very well. They always supported and encouraged me.

My New Lifestyle as a Parisian

With tireless efforts and tremendous support, I made progress. Finally, I was notified to be present at the Prefecture of Police again. This time, the French official was a man. He asked me for my passport. To my great surprise, he kept it and quickly put it in the drawer of his desk. I had submitted a new application form for my residence permit. He read it carefully and, with a simple stroke of his pen, crossed out the words "Cambodian nationality" I had written on the form, replacing it with the new status "Cambodian refugee." I was shocked to see the very quick

removal of my nationality, as I did not expect to witness the sudden loss of this important identity. In fact, the French authorities had granted me refugee status before I was formally informed. I was probably one of the early Cambodian refugees in France in 1974, while the war was still going on in Cambodia. After nearly one year, I obtained everything: my refugee status, my work permit, and my permanent resident permit.

By May 1974, I moved out of Sou Nem's apartment to live in a student room in the 14th district of Paris, in an area called "Alesia," the name of a metro station, at 20, rue du Moulin Vert. The building there was quite clean and had many apartments. But there were no apartments on the ground floor, except for the student rooms. The rooms were hidden behind a corridor wall. My room was at the end of the corridor leading to the back of the building. It was a furnished single room with a bed and a small refrigerator. The shower room and the WC were outside, shared with the occupants of other rooms. For the first time, I found a place to live. I enjoyed my freedom, especially the chance to further my studies. I paid a monthly rent of FFR 399, almost

double what I had paid to Sou Nem's family. But my new home had an inconvenience because there was no kitchen. So, I bought a small electric stove, a kind of hotplate, to boil water or milk for breakfast. In principle, I was not allowed to prepare meals inside the rooms.

Alesia was a place full of activities. I found everything I needed: public gardens, an open market, shopping, cinema, cafés, restaurants, drug stores, banks, barber shops, book shops, etc. In one direction, it was not so far from La Porte d'Orléans and in the other, not so far from Montparnasse. So, it was an easy place to spend money. I enjoyed living there, although I kept visiting Sou Nems regularly. Finally, I missed Mrs Sou Nem's Cambodian food. Now, I eat French food at lunchtime and make dinner myself with pre-cooked food. At first, I did not know much about French food and drinks. Since I got my regular worker and Parisian resident status, I no longer eat sandwiches. For one year now, during lunch breaks, I have eaten only "steak, frites," steak and French fries in a self-service restaurant in front of my office. I stuck to my choice so regularly that, in the end, the employee

serving hot meals could anticipate my order and serve me “steak, frites” automatically, without asking me. For drinks, I began with milk, as I hadn't had the chance to drink it in Cambodia. I tried to replace water with milk. Later on, I tried beer, then sparkling wine, and finally red wine.

My first year in Paris was marred by a long period of uncertainty about my legal status. It was also dominated by severe nostalgia and homesickness. In one of my letters to my parents, I wrote, “I’m waiting for your reply like a child expecting his mother to come back from the market.” I mentioned this feeling because, in general, every morning in Cambodia, many mothers went to the market and came back a few hours later with sweets or food in hand, to the great happiness of their children. It was a real joy for me each time I received mail from Cambodia, even though the news was not always good. The situation in Cambodia was deteriorating day after day. But I was really happy to get news from my parents.

My employer was satisfied with my job performance, and my salary rose regularly, from FFR 1,400 to FFR 1,600, from FFR

1,600 to FFR 1,800, to FFR 2,000 per month at the beginning of 1975. My position was also promoted. I became a full accountant. I enjoyed a very good relationship with Mrs Debaize, my supervisor, whom I would later call by her first name, Christiane, and who became one of my rare and closest friends for many decades to come.

While working, I enrolled in a distance-learning accounting program at the French “Institut National des Techniques Economiques et Comptables,” where I met another friend, Christian Leday. Christian was an accountant working in a factory in Normandy, where he was living with his wife and two children. He came to Paris once a week for group work, where the students met their specialised professors. I was in his group, and we became friends at our first meeting. For a while, I kept visiting him in his small village outside of a town named L’Aigle. In the village, there were only a few dozen houses. We exchanged gifts at every Christmas and New Year. Sometimes, Christian and his wife invited me to spend holidays with them in Brittany, under a tent.

To me, Christian used to say, “Mouly, you are good to be a minister of foreign affairs.”

My studies were not conclusive, as it was very difficult for me to study while my head was in the clouds. My living conditions disturbed me, as did my constant concerns for my family in Cambodia. At the end of 1974, I failed the annual examination. At the same time, many Cambodian students were obliged to return to Cambodia, either because they had finished their studies, their grants had arrived at term, or because they had no rights to work to earn a living in France. Most of those returnees died during the Khmer Rouge reign of terror. On the contrary, many other Cambodians succeeded in fleeing the country and took refuge safely in France, just a few months before the fall of the Khmer Republic. Phansoriyasi, my former colleague at Comin Khmer, was among those lucky people. He came to France with his wife and two children. Later, the children were sent back to Cambodia with their grandfather, who had spent a very short visit in France just before the Khmer Rouge’s victory. Phansoriyasi became a close

friend with whom I would later spend many weekends and holidays in France.

Joy and Tears on April 17, 1975

By early 1975, the Sou Nems returned to Cambodia. I didn't have time to see them off at the airport. But I had met Mrs Sou Nem just a few days before their departure to give her my letter and some money I sent to my parents in Phnom Penh. Since they left Paris, I had lost contact with them. Dr Sou Nem was among the elite of the Khmer Republic. He certainly perished during Khmer Rouge rule.

On April 17, 1975, as usual, during the lunch break, I went to the bank near the Opera Theatre to deposit the company's checks. After finishing my work at the bank, I normally returned to Rue de l'Echelle to have lunch at the self-service restaurant in front of my office. But this time, I walked down several streets to eat in a Café near the Saint-Roch Church on Faubourg Saint-

Honoré Street. After lunch, instead of rushing straight to work, I continued walking along Des Pyramides Street until I reached De l'Opéra Avenue. At the corner, at the gate of the metro station named Les Pyramides, there was a kiosk where I bought a copy of "Le Monde," a French afternoon-edition newspaper. From the front page, I read, "Phnom Penh Fell." The news did not surprise me, as I had expected the fall of the Khmer Republic of Lon Nol to come within months.

My first, spontaneous, and instinctive reaction was an explosion of joy. For many years I had been strong. I never cried. But this time, my emotion was so intense that I could not control myself. Lifting my head, looking at the sky of Paris, exceptionally tearful, I said, "God, finally the war is over." Imagining the end of the cruel war as the end of the suffering of my people, my joy was immense, and my happiness was unspeakable. With "Le Monde" in my hands, instead of walking as usual, I just ran as fast as I could to bring the fresh news to my colleagues at the office. We discussed the situation in Cambodia for the rest of the day. Many shared my joy. But little by little, this joy was fading as we

gradually discovered the Khmer Rouge's brutality. Soon, I became perplexed by the Khmer Rouge victory. The world was surprised by the shutdown of daily life in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, and by the mass evacuation of the population from the cities. Finally, I received the news with mixed feelings: joy at the end of a destructive war mixed with uncertainty about the nation's future. Suddenly, I began to worry seriously about the fate of my loved ones in Cambodia.

From that day onward, I received more and more bad news about the influx of refugees at the French embassy in Phnom Penh, the summary executions of opponents, the unthinkable exodus, the strange closure of foreign embassies, etc., not to mention the absence of correspondence with our parents and relatives. Later on, only the news about the refugees seeking asylum in the French embassy and the negotiations to liberate them could reach us, as the Khmer Rouge succeeded in completely cutting off all links with the rest of the world. No reporters were allowed to travel inside. But the Khmer Rouge propaganda machinery was still working well. They denied the

news as a pure campaign of “US imperialism” against the Cambodian people.

A few months before the victory of the Khmer Rouge, the majority of the Cambodian students in Paris had pledged their support to the Khmer Rouge-dominated front led by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the FUNK. The students’ move was finally gratified by the French government's decision, under President Giscard d’Estaing, to recognise the Khmer Rouge-dominated front and the exiled government of Prince Sihanouk in April 1975, just one week before the fall of the Lon Nol regime. It was recognition at the eleventh hour. In the past, I had been invited three or four times to join the Khmer Rouge public meetings. I did not attend all the meetings, as I was embarrassed that I did not know how to sing the “Red Flag” song the Khmer Rouge performed at the end of each meeting, with the right hands rising. The song began with words such as “the red blood dispersed on the earth, the blood that was sacrificed, the blood of the masses, the peasants, the workers, the intellectuals that rose and became the red flag, etc.” This time, the Khmer Rouge organised a big meeting to celebrate

their victory. I thought it was an occasion to get fresh news from Cambodia. I decided to join the celebration. At the big gathering, to my surprise, I noticed many former strong and close supporters of Lon Nol who had suddenly shifted their stance. For me, I was disappointed because there was no news at all, except for propaganda and praise for what the Khmer Rouge called “Angkar” or “the organisation,” and for the Khmer Rouge leadership.

Not Joining the Revolution Because of My Capitalist Nature

For many months, the Khmer Rouge had continued to persuade Cambodian students or residents to abandon their lives in France and return to Cambodia. They dispatched a group of three or four cadres and militants to visit them at home, door to door. A group led by a woman named Mrs Hing Un came to my house, knocking at my door regularly in the evening and attempting to win my allegiance to their organisation and then my return to Cambodia. They tried to describe a new Cambodia as a place of new order, a new system of social justice, and a new way

of life. When asked why citizens of the new Cambodia could not exchange correspondence with parents or relatives living abroad, they answered that people were too busy with the work of national reconstruction; they had no time to write letters. To definitely break off our relation, I told the group that I was still deeply attached to capitalism, so I was not ready to join the new regime. I said, "I'm still covered with reactionary sins; thus, not ready to serve the revolution." Even though immediately after the Khmer Rouge victory I had requested the Khmer Rouge to accept my Cambodian citizenship instead of my refugee status, I never received their answer. I was finally lucky to cut off my relationship with them in time. Some compatriots chose to return to Cambodia and disappeared upon arrival. Many of those who chose to live in France suffered from separation from their families and relatives in Cambodia. They struggled to make a living, especially while seeking refugee status and jobs. Among them, I felt the most advantaged, as those fellow Cambodians were struggling for what I had already obtained.

The Situation of Khmer Refugees in Paris

Before the fall of Phnom Penh, my former colleagues at Comin Khmer sent me regular letters to keep me informed about events in Cambodia. One of them was a lady named Mary Hum, who announced that one of her nieces and her niece's husband were living in France. She alerted me that the couple might seek my assistance if needed. They had been living on their own means, with some support from the Lon Nol government, up to April 17, 1975. During that period, the niece and her husband had no contact with me. With the fall of Phnom Penh under Khmer Rouge control, they had no income, and they needed to find jobs. Now they sought my assistance. The niece, named Sony, and her husband, Khim Khankeo, were both from high-class families in Cambodia. Sony's father, Sarath Hum, was a secretary of state in the Lon Nol government. Khim Khankeo was a grandson of former Prime Minister Khim Tith. He was close to Lon Non, Lon Nol's brother. Since the victory of the Khmer Rouge, they had been searching for jobs for quite some time. One day, Khim Khankeo

asked to see me. He was typically Cambodian, with his dark skin and wavy hair. He liked talking and was a beautiful talker. He was older than me, but he called me "Big brother." He praised me for settling in France successfully. Immediately, I accepted his friendship. He was lucky, as he was showing up at the right moment. My travel agency was looking for an aide-accountant. In fact, since July, I had been promoted to replace Mrs Debaize as the head of the accounting section, leaving one position available. The next day, Khim Khankeo was recruited as my aide in the travel agency.

In France, I did not have many friends. I only had a few, but loyal, trusted, and sure ones. Christiane Debaize and her husband, Roland Rousseau, were among them. When we first met, they were living separately. Christiane had her own apartment in Montreuil, and Roland in Pierrefitte, in the northern suburbs of Paris. Their love for each other was so deep and strong that it could stand the many squabbles that were emerging all too often. Many times, when they went out to dine in town or spend a weekend in the countryside, they brought me with them. Roland

was an inspector at a large French insurance company, selling mostly life insurance contracts. Many friends called him jokingly “the man who sells the wind” because of his insurance services. He worked closely with lawyers and accounting firms. He had an important network of friends and contacts. One day, Christiane decided to leave her job as chief of the accounting section of Pharos France, the travel agency, to work as an accountant in diamond jewellery. But before she left the travel agency, she arranged for me to be promoted to take her place. And the company’s owner agreed. That is why I took over the new position in July 1975, with a salary increase to FFR 2,300 per month. In the new job, I obtained a professional qualification as “Comptable du 2me Échelon,” or “Full Accountant,” which was professionally correct, but I was not paid accordingly. My employer knew I was qualified for the job and that my promotion could save him money, as I was much underpaid compared to others with the same qualification. Roland was satisfied with my promotion, but not with my salary.

Despite having left the travel agency, Christiane kept visiting Pharos France regularly. For my part, I grew closer to her and her husband, Roland. We continued to go out and exchange phone calls very often, to the point where I became as close to them as a relative. One evening in September 1975, Roland and Christiane brought me in their car for dinner in Paris. At dinner, Roland told me he had found me a new, better job in Pierrefitte, a town where he was living. He had arranged an appointment for me to meet the CEO of the new company the next day afternoon. Roland did not tell me much about the new company or my prospective job.

Being Unexpectedly Promoted

The next afternoon, as planned, Roland came to pick me up at Pharos France. He drove me to Pierrefitte, a small municipality of working-class people. It was the first time I had passed through the northern part of the Parisian suburbs. In the car, Roland tried to teach me the area's geography, telling me the names and

activities of the many towns we were passing through. But I did not remember all of them on the spot. I was busy and nervous about my next meeting with the new employer. Finally, Roland briefed me on the new company. In fact, there were two small companies run by the same family: one named Motton S.A., the other TPP S.A. I was supposed to organise myself to work for both sister companies, which were next door to each other on the same street. Roland gave me one important piece of advice: not to tell the truth about the salary I was earning at Pharos France.

Roland parked his car at number 58 in a small street named Rue de Paris, just in front of the company's building under a sign, "Andre Motton S.A." We went up to the first floor, where the boss, Andre Motton, his wife, Annie Motton, and the outgoing accountant, Daniel Lazard, received us. Roland knew them well and seemed to be friends with everybody. He introduced me to them after exchanging a few jokes, then left to chat with colleagues at the other sister company, TPP S.A. We were meeting in Motton's office. The office was in a medium-sized room, located between the secretary's and the accountant's offices.

There was neither a waiting room nor a sofa. I sat in an extra chair Mrs Motton provided beside the CEO's desk.

Motton explained that he was looking for someone to replace his accountant, Lazard, who had decided to move to the South of France. He briefed me on the activities of his firms, which were rapidly expanding. The two firms had a combined workforce of almost 200 workers. In turn, the outgoing accountant, Lazard, presented his work and asked me two or three questions about tax, social, and labour legislation. At the conclusion of our discussion, Motton offered me a position of "comptable principal" or "principal accountant" for a three-month probation period, with a monthly salary of FFR 4,500, twice my salary in Pharos France. He proposed that after the probation period, I would become the "chief accountant" of both companies with a pay of FFR 5,000 per month. It was a superb offer that I did not expect. To tell the truth, I did not waste a second to accept it. We agreed that I would take office on November 3, 1975, so that I could properly notify my former employer, Pharos France.

After the meeting, we toured the buildings and offices, visiting workers in the back of the courtyard, where a huge hall served as storage and a workers' shelter, and where a garage and workshop repaired the company's cars and equipment. Facing the street, the ground floor, with its glass showroom, was arranged to display various home equipment, ranging from bath products to kitchen gear. Finally, we ended up in a café on the corner of Rue de Paris, run by a father named MeMe and his son, Ali, from a Tunisian or Algerian family. Ultimately, Roland joined us in the café to celebrate our successful deal.

Andre Motton was a self-made man. The first time we met, he was in his mid-thirties. He was married at 18, while his wife was 16. The couple had two daughters. Mrs Motton was always at her husband's side, working as his secretary or assistant. Motton left secondary school at a young age and began his job as a plumber. He started his career as a salaried worker before becoming independent and working on his own. Two years ago, he met two associates: Michel Camus, an engineer in public works, and Jacques Fontaine, a land surveyor. They agreed to form a

company named Travaux Publiques Pierrefittois, or TPP.SA. The Motton family held the majority of the shares, contributing 80% of the capital, in real assets and cash combined. The two associates, Camus and Fontaine, managed the company's day-to-day core activities, bringing their know-how and their first clientele from their former positions. The two close friends had been employed for many years by a public works company that was in bankruptcy. At the same time, Motton transformed his own firm into a commercial company and named it Motton S.A., with his wife and relatives as associates. The two sister companies worked mostly for the same big customer, a French nationalised real estate company named SCIC. Motton S.A. dealt with plumbing, roofing, tiling, and heating, while TPP S.A. operated in public works, specially building small roads and parking grounds.

My former boss, Amiel, was angry with me for my decision to leave his company, Pharos France. But it was my right, as we lived in a free world and a market economy. I was acting under market forces. I owed Pharos France, however, a debt of gratitude, as the travel agency had recruited me in the first place when I did

not have my work permit. Finally, my departure was agreed upon amicably. I had no trouble, as I had notified them well in advance.

On November 3, 1975, I began my new job at Motton S.A. in Pierrefitte. I took the metro from Alesia to La Gare du Nord early in the morning and boarded a suburban train to Pierrefitte. Not to mention the waiting time at Paris Gare du Nord, it took me about 15 minutes to arrive at my destination. From the train station, I walked down a main street for about ten minutes more to reach my new workplace. When I arrived, the boss and his wife were already at work. They supervised the distribution of tasks and duties to the workers and inspected their departure to work sites in different places in the town and its surroundings. To begin the day's work, the first thing they did was bring me to the café.

My first day at Motton S.A. was facilitated by the outgoing accountant, Daniel Lazard, who needed to hand over all responsibilities to me quickly before he left. I spent the whole day with him. Lazard was older than I was and was still a bachelor. I didn't know much about his educational background, but he seemed to know many tricky ways to handle tax arrangements.

After work, we went out to dine, drink, and listen to music in different places in Pierrefitte and Paris. Lazard drank a lot of Ricard, the popular French aniseed liquor, beer, wine, and cognac. He was so strong that he could drink all night. I tried to imitate him, but I did not have such experience. Consequently, I was as drunk as a lord; I could not return home. After that day, Daniel Lazard disappeared, and I never heard from him again.

As the company's accountant, and beyond routine accounting tasks, my responsibility was also to advise the boss on how to perform his duties in accordance with laws and regulations, especially French commercial and labour laws. Motton and his wife regarded me as their personal legal and tax advisor. I was probably the only "intellectual" in the firm, so my position was highly respected, and my responsibilities typically increased. To help the accountant fulfil his responsibilities, the company hired a lawyer and a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) who worked on a consulting basis. In addition, the CPA checked the annual accounts and certified their accuracy before submitting them to the authorities. At the same time, the lawyer helped update the

record book for both ordinary and extraordinary board meetings. When I completed the three months of probation, Motton made me one of the company's shareholders, although I gave him only my name, not any money. For this, I signed a blank paper that he carefully kept in his safe. Thanks to our working relationship and frequent contacts, I became good friends with both the lawyer, Delman, and the CPA, Hollander. I quickly became a trusted partner to them, as the Mottons gave me full powers to deal with legal, regulatory, and accounting and taxation issues.

At Motton, he was surrounded by his people. He employed his father-in-law, whom he called by his nickname, NoNo, as a driver, and his brother-in-law, Jean Paul, as a storeman. Daniel, another brother-in-law, the husband of his younger sister, a mechanic, was in charge of the company garage. In addition, after work hours, Daniel organised workers' gatherings almost every afternoon for a "Ricard" drink, as he found every reason to celebrate. Those people quickly became my friends. They were nice to me. Even though I found them heavily drunk many times a week, especially Daniel, the garage man, Motton treated them

more harshly than any ordinary worker. Very often, I heard the boss shouting at them from a hundred metres away for any wrongdoing they were committing. His people called him by his nickname, "Deh-Deh".

After three weeks of work at his company, Motton found me a studio flat for a lower rent than my student room in Paris. The studio flat was located in the neighbouring town of Stains, at 6, Allee Paul Langevin. This location is on the border of the three towns: Sarcelles, Stains, and Pierrefitte. The studio was on the third floor, the highest floor of the building, in a quiet and restful part of Stains. It was an unfurnished flat, but I paid only FFR 300 per month. Motton ordered his staff to repaint the studio for me, as he had arranged with the landlord, SCIC, the real estate company, to cover the painting costs. He also ordered NoNo, his father-in-law, to take one of the company's pick-up trucks to help me move my belongings from Paris to the new studio flat.

When he arrived at my student room, NoNo was surprised and disappointed to see that I didn't have much to move. In the end, he drove a half-empty truck from Paris to Stains, as I could

not take anything from the furnished student room other than some clothes, books, and household equipment. That day, Motton gave me one day off so I could go shopping to fully furnish my studio. He also sent me one of his salespeople, who knew his network of suppliers, so I could get advantageous conditions. We went to Saint-Denis, a bigger neighbouring city. I bought various furniture items, including a bed, bath products and related items, a work desk, chairs, a cabinet, a dining table, and kitchen gear. The boss also sent his brother-in-law, Daniel, the mechanic, and his teammates to help install the fitted carpet. Finally, very quickly, I had a fully furnished studio.

After three months of probation, I was confirmed as chief accountant of the two sister companies, Motton S.A. and TPP S.A., and my monthly wage rose to FFR 5,000. I advanced from an ordinary worker to an executive position, which was exceptional for a young refugee like me. I quickly earned my boss's trust and confidence and the friendship of the two associates at TPP S.A. In management, I became an indispensable part of the company. The boss consulted me before recruiting, dismissing, demoting, or

promoting staff. I advised him on when and by how much workers' pay should rise. I signed many documents on behalf of the employer for any worker or staff member who needed the employer's certificates to claim social-security benefits, work-related accident compensation, retirement benefits, or annual leave compensation (In the public works profession, private companies do not pay annual leave compensation directly to their workers; instead, they pay regular contributions to collective funds, which, in turn, pay the compensation annually to the workers). As the chief accountant, I participated in talks with bank representatives to negotiate the best terms for loans or bank overdrafts. I also visited the company work sites from time to time and had drinks with the workers. I often joined the boss and his associates for business lunches or dinners with their customers.

In addition to my accounting studies, I also spent my spare time attending driving lessons. After a few weeks of learning (theory and driving), I passed my driving test on the first attempt, which was unusual for many learners. With my driver's license in hand, my boss authorised me to use one of the company's cars,

with its paint and logo, while I waited for my own, which I would be purchasing soon. For this, he sent me to Daniel, the garage's man, who knew practical ways to get a good second-hand car at a good price. When I saw him, Daniel proposed that if I agreed to pay FFR 2,500, he would deliver a good one within two weeks, a proposal I accepted without delay. The next morning, Daniel came to my office and asked me to go to Saint-Denis with him, telling me especially not to forget my chequebook. He drove me in his towing truck. We went straight to visit a garage where I could see many new and second-hand cars for sale. In the back of the garage, he showed me a dusty car, blackened with thick dirt. It was a Peugeot 204 family car. Daniel said, "This is your car." I was disappointed by the car's condition and hesitant to pay the FFR 2,500. In addition, the car engine was in trouble, and its battery was empty. But finally, with Daniel's assurance that it would be the interesting one, I agreed to write my check. In the end, instead of driving the newly purchased car, we towed it to Daniel's garage for the next round of intensive repairs and embellishing work.

Daniel was a busy man. He had two or three cars parked inside the garage, waiting for repairs. The cars belonged to the “company’s good friends.” In fact, in addition to its usual work, the garage was a kind of public relations place where Motton entertained his important clients, especially by providing free services to those who could reward him with good contracts. Some people from the “maintenance and repair department” of SCIC came very often with their cars to see Daniel for various car work, from painting, decorating, and furnishing to engine work. My car was not a high priority, so it was on Daniel’s waiting list. Finally, Daniel took one month instead of the two weeks he had promised to complete the work, which included painting and refurbishing. As a result of his skilful and artful work, I got a beautiful car that looked no different from a brand-new one. I was in seventh heaven, as it was the first one I had had. The car was so perfect that a co-worker was willing to exchange it for his new Citroën 2CV. But I loved my Peugeot 204 so much that I refused the exchange offer. When I came to work, I parked my car in a good place where I could easily look at it from my first-floor office through a glass window.

During my years of service to the Motton family, I enjoyed an excellent relationship with everyone, including my boss, his two associates, and my colleagues in the two sister companies. Regularly, after my breakfast consisting of hot instant coffee and black coffee, sometimes with cakes or fruit, I drove quietly to my office. I arrived between 8h30 and 8h45 a.m. Most often, Motton was already either in his office or in the backyard. His wife came a few minutes later. When she arrived, they both invited me to MeMe Café for morning coffee. From time to time, the two associates, Camus and Fontaine, joined us, or occasionally, I went to the Café with them without the boss. The morning coffee was a time to talk about business or non-business issues. I took many cups of coffee per day as one of my diplomatic ways to respond to the many invitations I received. Going to MeMe's place, arriving at the office, and having coffee in the morning before starting work had become my daily ritual for many years.

Clear Separation of Work from Sentiments

At lunchtime, I went either with the Motton family to a nearby restaurant or with the two associates, Camus and Fontaine, to a self-service cafeteria in the neighbouring town of Sarcelles. The Mottons ate around 1 p.m., as they had to wait for their two daughters, Patricia and Celine, to finish their classes first. Most of the time, I joined them at their table and ordered the same meal. In the restaurant, I bought my lunch by signing the bill on an account, which I settled with my own money at the end of every month. In the self-service restaurant, I paid cash. But we were enjoying a more popular atmosphere and a special hot meal service of Mrs Goujon, a long-serving and well-known waitress of the place.

Little by little, because of my growing friendship with them, I had to face a tough decision: where and with whose company should I go for my lunch? Should I join the Mouton family at the regular restaurant, or join the two associates at the self-service cafeteria? Almost every day, at noon, one of the two associates,

either Camus or Fontaine, came into the courtyard and called to me, who was still working in my office, at the top of their voice, saying, "Mouly, it's time for lunch." In addition, every Saturday, when all offices were closed, the associates invited me for a weekly worksite visit. We always began the visit by touring the important sites and ended up at a good restaurant, where we spent no less than three hours eating, drinking, joking, and talking. From that time, I fell deeply in love with French cuisine and French red wines. For me, sharing my lunchtime was a pleasant exercise for a while, but later it became seriously disturbing, as I needed to preserve my neutrality facing growing rivalry between the two parties in the business- the boss and his associates. The rivalry arose within the management of their joint venture. They did not compete for the simple pleasure of having my company at lunchtime.

The dispute surfaced over the spending power within the company that Motton was holding alone, in his capacity as CEO. The associates believed that they did most of the important work, such as public relations, marketing, technical operations, and

resources management. In contrast, Motton did nothing but take advantage of their hard work. They thought they deserved more power than ordinary company executives. In fact, from the beginning of their association, Camus was appointed technical director and Fontaine director of operations. Even though Motton was the only check-holder and the only top company official with exclusive rights to decide what to pay or not to pay, I got more and more headaches maintaining vigilant, fragile neutrality so I wouldn't be seen as taking sides with either the Motton family or the two associates.

The more time I spent working for the Motton family, the closer my relationship with them grew, beyond the work-to-work or business-to-business framework. It became more personal. The Mottons invited me frequently to dine at their apartment in Sarcelles and later at their new house in Pierrefitte. I joined them many times for family gatherings at Christmas and New Year's. Mrs Motton often talked to me about her daughter, Patricia, who was 10 years younger than me. At the time, she was studying accounting. Every time we met at MeMe café, Mrs Motton told me

about Patricia's activities and her studies. In addition, Mrs Motton asked me to help Patricia do her homework, a request that I dared not refuse. For this, Patricia came to see me most often in my office with her exercise book. Sometimes, I visited her in their house. One weekend, I drove Patricia to see her grandparents, NoNo and his wife, in Sedan, at the border with Belgium, as after my first year working for his son-in-law, NoNo had retired and had returned to his native town.

On another occasion in the summer, Mrs Motton called me from their summer apartment in Saint-Raphaël, in the South of France, not far from the famous city of Nice, asking me to join them for some holidays. That day, after she had talked, Mrs Motton gave the phone to Patricia so that she could convince me to spend days with them. Finally, I agreed to go along for the drive. I drove my Peugeot 204 alone for almost 1000 km, taking the opportunity to visit the Melatos, my former colleagues at Pharos France, who were retiring to a small village in a beautiful region of France, Provence. My relationship with the Motton family was so close that I called Mrs Motton, half-jokingly, my mother-in-

law when I talked about her among my circle of Cambodian friends.

Without interruption and despite the failure of 1974, I continued my studies at the “Institut National des Techniques Economiques et Comptables.” In 1976, I passed the first examination, which gave me access to the preparation of “higher degrees in accounting.” Since I worked with the Motton family, my standard of living improved greatly. I hired a part-time cleaning lady who spent one to two hours per day taking care of my studio flat and my clothes. In sum, I had an interesting job, a loving car, a well-maintained studio; I took most of my meals in restaurants and slept in my own furniture, surrounded by many good friends. Thinking of my refugee status, I felt exceptionally privileged to have such material advantages that many of my fellow citizens, at that time, could not dare to dream of. But the more I acquired these material comforts, the more I suffered morally from losing contact with my parents, my brothers, and my sisters, as I was eager to share with them the benefits of my efforts, knowing well their poor living conditions in Cambodia. My moral suffering grew

considerably when the mass media around the world discovered and made public more detailed atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge against the Cambodian people. The more I was integrated into French society and accepted by my French friends and entourage, the more I felt the need to preserve my roots. I could not cut off all ties to my origins. To maintain my equilibrium, I decided to get in touch again with the Cambodian community in France.

Getting in Touch Again

With the Cambodian Community in France

To tell the truth, since the Khmer Rouge victory, except for a few friends, I had avoided any contact with the community, as I was deeply frustrated by the behaviour of some Cambodian leaders. To re-establish my contact with the Cambodian world, I turned to Phansoriyasi, Khankeo, and his wife, Sony, who had become my assistant for a while at TPP S.A. before she found a

job closer to their home. Later, Khankeo introduced me to his friend, Ung You Tecklin, whom I finally added to an inseparable group of Cambodian friends. When Sony left, I recruited one of her friends, Om Vathana, who quickly became my trusted and reliable assistant for many years in France.

My Parisian life was dominated by my struggle for a decent living and smooth integration into Western society, which contributed tremendously to shaping my personality and consolidating my character as a free man. On the other hand, my life was burdened by the dramatic events in Cambodia that tied me firmly to the Cambodian people. As one of the sons of Cambodia, I could not live peacefully my life alone, in a manner indifferent or insensitive to what was happening to my country, my motherland, and my people. More and more, I was facing a delicate choice between two situations: either to continue to make my comfortable life in France, by getting married to a French girl and by founding my own family under my full responsibility, or to sacrifice that life by joining patriotic Cambodians on a long and difficult journey to rehabilitate the Cambodian nation. If I had married a French girl, I

would have devoted all my energy to my French family, certainly abandoning my roots and my origins. It would have meant goodbye to Cambodia. I knew I could not be responsible for a family and work for the Cambodian cause, fulfilling both missions at the same time. In any circumstance, if married, I could never leave my family behind. But finally, my choice was clear. I chose to keep my Cambodian identity and to shape my future with the fate of the Cambodian people. It was with this clear choice in mind that, little by little, I tried to convince my close French friends of my determination to return to Cambodia. Consequently, I decided to get involved in many social activities in the service of the Cambodian community in France, in particular, and in favour of Cambodia, in general.

In addition to the workload of my professional responsibilities, I engaged in voluntary actions that took up all my spare time, including my time for studies, and probably took up most of my youth. Finally, my Parisian life was not as pompous or extravagant as many of my fellow citizens might think.