REFACE

For a long time, I have longed to see Cambodians themselves write stories about Cambodia, for most of the books about this country have been penned by foreign authors, particularly Western writers. I am confident that knowledgeable people, and those with experience in professional, artistic, and political life, certainly have many topics related to their own lives. If they had written, printed, and published their experiences, or the stories they have come across, then Cambodians of generations to come could think about or learn from them.

As for myself, I initially wrote this book as an autobiography for my children and grandchildren to learn about my native village and the lineage of the Ieng family. Nevertheless, since I have gone through historic events for more than six decades, sometimes as an affected citizen, sometimes as an observer, and sometimes as a tiny stakeholder or a living witness, I am imbued with the idea of disclosing those events for the public′s knowledge. Hence, this book is a writing about the social, economic,

and political issues of Cambodia, written according to my memories and perceptions, as well as traditional documentation. This came about because I understood that books about Cambodia by Cambodians themselves have not yet existed in abundance. Alongside my personal stories, this book includes detailed accounts of historic or social events from one generation to another, especially those in the last decades.

My childhood was shaped by Cambodian society, which adhered to Buddhism and its customs and respected the monarchy, and by a political context that moved from the era of insecurity to the era of national independence. For a while, at a time when our country was at peace, other Cambodian kids and I grew up without the expectation that, one day in the future, our nation would experience unthinkable and incalculable devastation. In that peaceful era, the majority of the Cambodian people had absolute faith in the leadership of the late HM Former King Norodom Sihanouk, whom people in general called Prince-Father and who was highly revered, as equal to Buddha and God. Everyone was convinced that his rule

would be stable and would last forever; nothing could jolt it or bring it down. Nonetheless, the fate of our country was not as we had envisioned.

Beginning in March 1970, the flames of war intensified in Cambodia until an autogenocidal regime, unprecedented in our humanity´s history, was brought into being. The entire Cambodian nation and people suffered devastation beyond words. Those inside the country were victims of massacre, starvation, and forced labour, and were separated from their beloved wives, husbands, children, grandchildren, siblings, and relatives. They also completely lost rights and freedom, the dignity of human beings. Those unable to bear the sufferings fled to foreign countries, while some others rose in revolt and set up armed resistance movements to oppose the Pol Pot regime.

My youthhood life drifted along on the billowing strength of the war flames. In France, I, who was separated from my family and living alone as a refugee and who had already overcome some obstacles, could not sever myself from my blood and roots as a Cambodian. The events in the 1970s inspired me to engage in politics,

beginning in a foreign country. In joining the Khmer People´s National Liberation Front [KPNLF] in the early 1970s, the main idea of my struggle was to oppose the Pol Pot regime and liberate the Cambodian people from slavery. Nonetheless, due to a geopolitical foothold in favour of the Khmer Rouge, not only did this front defer the struggle against Pol Pot, but it also cooperated with the genocidal clique in the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, or the Tripartite Coalition Government. That was an alliance with the Khmer Rouge as the core force. That was an irony of fate.

In the geopolitical context of that epoch, the majority of the people in the tripartite alliance viewed the Vietnamese troops´ presence in Cambodia as an occupation of Cambodian territory. Therefore, the troops´ presence became a topic for the Khmer Rouge´s propaganda, in quest of support both in and outside the country. In fact, since the 1993 general election, the words of propaganda that Vietnam controlled in Cambodia have already been reduced to completely meaningless utterances. Nevertheless, such a propaganda topic has so

far been used by political high rollers to seize political advantages.

This book recounts the story of the anti-Vietnam resistance movements, in particular the Khmer People´s National Liberation Front of which I was Secretary General; the formation of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea; the functions of this government´s leaders; and the key role of then-Prince Norodom Sihanouk. In reality, the tripartite pact helped continue the political life of the Pol Pot Khmer Rouge for another while. The internal dispute within the Khmer People´s National Liberation Front, which caused the front to decline and weaken gradually, will also be part of the account. Moreover, rivalries among the Non-Communist Resistance movements and the Khmer Rouge´s supremacy over its two other partners in the Coalition Government will also be raised. Those revelations disclose the juncture that led to the tripartite alliance´s failure to achieve victory and prompted Prince Norodom Sihanouk to seek ways and means to engage in direct talks with the Phnom Penh leaders. This stance was

opposed to the position of the Khmer Rouge and that of the Son Sann group.

Due to the Pol Pot regime being the common foe of all Cambodians, anti-Pol Pot movements in the interior of the country had broken out since 1977. In the resistance movements, a Regiment Commander, who was still a youth at that time, exhibited extraordinarily determined resolve and steadfast courage, hardly found in Cambodia′s history, until success was attained in knocking down the genocidal Pol Pot regime, once and for all. Hence, this book also recounts that historic heroism, which is the story of the struggle carried out by Samdech Techo Hun Sen, the incumbent Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia. Prime Minister Hun Sen is a Cambodian leader born into an authentic Cambodian peasant family. His adversaries misjudged his leadership capabilities. Eventually, the Pol Pot Khmer Rouge′s political and organisational structures were definitely dismantled thanks to Hun Sen′s win-win policy at the end of the 1990s. This win-win policy is a separate topic for research in another book.

By and large, the youth uphold the values of integrity and social justice and have strong patriotism. When the country was at war with foreign aggressors, most of them volunteered to serve as soldiers to defend the country. If there were a revolution, the majority of youths would volunteer to serve as frontline or vanguard forces of that revolution. Prime Minister Hun Sen, a young man in the 1970s, was among the youth mentioned above. As for myself, earlier, I also took part in activities against Pol Pot, but due to the geopolitics of that era, I was obliged to join the tripartite alliance instead. In his book entitled "10 Years of Cambodia Process," Prime Minister Hun Sen's consideration that any participation in the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea was boarding the Khmer Rouge ship was absolutely correct.

The account of the anti-Vietnam resistance movements' activities in the 1980s could be described as the exhibition of the scene from the trip on board that Khmer Rouge ship. The agreement on setting up the Supreme National Council, or in short, the SNC, gave me the possibility to jump off the Khmer Rouge "Democratic

Kampuchea″ ship and eventually board the bigger ship. Since arriving in Phnom Penh by the end of 1991, I had resolved not to go back to the Cambodian-Thai border anymore to carry on the struggle. I still remember that in July 1992, in a car heading to Phnom Penh from Udong District, after participating in a Reforestation Day, US Ambassador Charles H. Twinning asked me if a bad event occurred, would I return to conducting the struggle along the border anew. I answered, "No;" I will not go back to the border, come rain or shine, for I have already gained more than enough experiences there." I stressed that I would join and try my utmost to ensure that the election takes place. The issue of whether participating in the 1993 election was the turning point when Son Sann and I chose different paths. I maintained my unchanged position of participating in the election at all costs, while the pro-Son Sann faction was still sitting on the fence. At one time, it said it would take part, but at another, it asked to postpone the polls. Luckily, despite a raft of obstacles, almost all of our Cambodian voters throughout the country, except those living in the Khmer Rouge-controlled areas, went out in force to cast their ballots in 1993. As a result, the 1993

Constitution was proclaimed, which is the top law of the land and the only roof under which all Cambodians of all political shades can take shelter and live together in harmony.

Eventually, I joined the Cambodian People´s Party to serve further the people and the nation. This major Cambodian political party has adhered to the tradition of linking its destiny with the fate of the entire people. This is my political life, a life on a tortuous path. This is the tortuous path toward peace. The first part of this book focuses only on the Sihanouk-Hun Sen meeting by the end of 1987, because it is the key point that broke the stalemate, paving the way for subsequent talks toward the settlement of the Cambodian problem´s internal aspects.

With the study of more than 2,000 documents, news articles, books about Cambodia, and some records, this book could be of interest to readers, enabling them to comprehend the issues facing our country in the past decades. This book contains many detailed points that readers may perceive as useless. Nevertheless, because they relate to private biographies, they are kept. I am

convinced that this book will be subject to criticism and high or low ratings, depending on readers´ sentiments and political inclinations. Anyway, taking into consideration the concrete process of life and the events that I have been aware of, I wrote this book by trying to make use of my head, not my heart. Because if based on emotion or sentiment, it might be leaning toward hate, love, or fear, and may be deviating from the truth.

As mentioned above, I am eager to see a growing number of Cambodians write Cambodian stories as a contribution to substantially building our nation´s intellectual resources. I used to listen to accounts given by many Cambodian citizens, especially by our fellow compatriots who went through the Pol Pot regime. They had countless stories to tell. However, I also realise that those storytellers are willing to write only if there are readers. Without readers, their writing is useless. We should read a lot of books to the point of creating reading habits; according to the adage, reading more boosts intelligence. In several developed countries, priority is given to investing in the building and strengthening of intellectual

resources. This book, entitled "On the Tortuous Path to Peace," is my meagre contribution to building Cambodians' intellect, in which each of us should take part, now and in the future, without fail.

Chapter One

From My Native Village

(The 1950s and 1960s)

I was born more than sixty years ago in a small village named Snay Pol in Prey Veng Province, situated in the eastern part of Cambodia. Snay Pol is the administrative center of Pearang District. At the time I was born, there were fewer than one thousand inhabitants. The village is in the east, about 70 km from Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia. However, because the area's infrastructure was in very bad condition and we used to travel by bicycle or motorbike, it generally took half a day to reach the village from Phnom Penh, even though many people preferred to travel straight to Phnom Penh rather than to go to Prey Veng, the provincial capital town, which is about 30 km east.

Travelling from My Village to the City

In the 1960s, the road from Snay Pol to Prey Veng was still worse and suffered from seasonal heavy flooding. We normally used the road in the dry season, which lasts from November to May. Two buses, one painted red and the other blue, owned by two competing Vietnamese families, shuttled between the village and the provincial capital. The 30 km journey took at least three to four hours, as the buses made many stopovers to pick up more passengers and goods, including live chickens, ducks, or pigs, vegetables, or other commodities. Along the road, endless rice fields, marked by thousands of palm trees, separated a few villages. During the journey, passengers were sometimes asked to leave their seats and walk over several craters or waterways so the bus could move. Usually, when it passed through each village, some small children, naked or half-naked, ran behind it, as though running in a fierce 100-metre race, under the rain of sandy dust spread by the bus wheels. Those small creatures always enjoyed the attempt to catch the bus in motion. Almost every time, they

were covered from top to bottom in white dust. The lucky ones enjoyed a few minutes of free transportation service, clinging to the first bare irons they found available at the rear of the vehicle, while the others laughed happily.

The road was generally bumpy and was also used by oxcarts, bicycles, or motorbikes. The road to Phnom Penh was no different from a pathway and was not usable by cars. It was petite but easier for bike riders, as it passed through more villages where they could buy food or refreshments when needed. It crossed over a river called Tonle Tauch (Small River) and some other watercourses or streams, which were spanned by flimsy bridges made of bamboo or wood that could hardly support the weight of an ordinary car. This road passed through a long forest and a flat land and led up to the Mekong River, in a district of a neighbouring province named Kandal, where travellers would take a ferry or commercial boat if they were to continue the trip to the capital city. In the rainy season, both roads were abandoned for three or four months (from August to November) as the whole region was inundated. During that period, people would travel by boat. The

same two or three businessmen ran the fluvial transportation business every year. The boats carrying passengers and goods took half a day or a full day to reach Phnom Penh, depending on the season. The journey was sometimes pleasant, as we could take our lunch on board in the middle of an immense water reservoir, giving the impression of entering a real ocean. In September and October, the water level was so high that we could not distinguish the surface from the sky. In some remote areas, the water rose to the roofs of houses or almost completely submerged the few palm trees we could see. While we were travelling, hundreds of birds of various species and colours flew over us or swam nearby. Fish were also abundant. When the water went down, in some small rivers, we could see some unwise fish jumping out of the water whenever any boat passed.

At that time, I had no sense of ecology. When the water lowered further, the boat would move slowly, following limited waterways obstructed by many branches of trees crossing over the boat passage. In my village, people generally had both bicycles and individual or family boats so they could move in every

season. Others considered those who could afford to possess both a motorbike and a boat as rich fellows. This was the conventional standard of living at the time. My parents owned both means of transportation, although their boat had no engine. Later on in the 1960s, this standard of "to be called rich" was upgraded to "having a motorbike, a TV set, a motorised boat, and living in a wooden house under a roof covered by tiles".

The Daily Life of Villagers

Snay Pol was divided into two parts: Upper Snay Pol (Snay Pol Loeu) and Lower Snay Pol (Snay Pol Krom). People living in the upper village were mainly peasants. Their main occupation was rice farming. Early in the morning, they started their work in the rice field before the sun had turned on the heat. During the season of heavy work, peasants used to turn to one another for help. Very often, groups of farmers, or sometimes an entire village, were mobilised to provide the workforce for the family, which needed it during ploughing, planting, or harvest time. In turn, the

assisted family would take part in the next mobilisation to help other families, following the timetable agreed upon by the farmers themselves. Generally, the atmosphere of this collective and voluntary work was joyful. Men, women, boys, and girls spontaneously exchanged jokes, improvised songs, or sang various verses of poetry to forget their fatigue. They used the occasion to engage in talent competitions. After their farming work, most of the men spent their spare time climbing the palm trees to collect their juice.

The juice, when still fresh, can be sold as is or made into palm sugar or palm wine. Palm wine was very popular. It was not expensive and could replace Western beer for many people. Others would seek work in the more prosperous Lower Snay Pol as carpenters or as simple construction workers. Women either helped their husbands make palm sugar or plaited traditional mats made from dried palm leaves. For sure, palm trees provided many economic advantages for those poor farmers who worked so hard to earn not much, compared with their fellow villagers in other parts of the village. Many of their houses were mostly made of

bamboo, with roofs covered with thatch. Only a few were made of wood and covered at the top by tiles. The Cambodian farmers′ houses were, in general, built elevated so that the ground could be used as a cow shed. The two parts of the village, the upper and the lower, were separated by a distance of about one kilometre. But at that time of my childhood, it seemed far away to me.

The difference in living conditions also appeared striking. In the lower part of the village, the houses were mainly made of wood. Even some were made of brick. Many business people of Chinese origin and civil servants, mostly schoolteachers, lived there. The lower part was also a marketplace where people from neighbouring villages brought in their agricultural products for sale. Every day, almost at a fixed time, around 4 a.m., Horrifying cries of dying pigs woke up the village, as the animals had just received knife shots to their necks administered by the three Chinese butchers of the village. The way the butchers killed pigs provided fresh blood that they could sell after boiling it. The butcher sold not only pig meat but also other internal parts of the animal. From 5 a.m., the main road leading to the market became

busy. The first people came either on foot, by bicycle, or by motorbike, carrying goods for sale. They came to prepare their display, which was usually put on a kind of bamboo bed called "Kre."[1] The goods varied from vegetables to chickens, fish, and meats (beef and pork), and all kinds of cakes or fruits. Only consumable goods were on sale at the marketplace. The other goods, including clothing and home or field equipment, were sold by Chinese businesspeople along the main street. The marketplace was open-air. We could easily recognize peasants in black clothes and their Krama (a traditional cotton scarf made locally, marked with many small interspersed blue or black and red squares) (the Khmer Rouge had used black pyjamas and Krama as their uniform).

The Krama can be used in many ways. It can replace pants or pyjamas when staying home. It can be used to clean sweat under a hot sun or to pack anything found unexpectedly. The Krama can be worn around the head or the neck. My folks never

[1] Kre or Kreh រ៉ែគ Kre or Kreh is the Khmer name for a kind of bed made from bamboo or wood.

used a Krama outside the home, as it was a sign of peasantry. And peasantry was not well respected by any city dweller at that time. Yet, one could find the lazy as well as the hardest workers among the peasants. Some came to the market to sell the products they had cultivated in their family garden next to the house, or to sell live chickens they had raised in their spare time, away from the rice-farming work. All-season products were coconuts, bamboo shoots, or sweet potatoes. Others came to sell the products they had just collected in the bushes or fished in the river, given by Mother Nature. In the rainy season, live frogs could also be found for sale in the market.

Cambodian Farmers and Chinese Shop Owners

Between 6 and 7 a.m., the place became more crowded, mostly with women seeking cooking ingredients, vegetables, meats, or fish to prepare daily meals for the family. Normally, Cambodian women would spend the whole morning and afternoon cooking after spending some time at the market. At 9 a.m., the

market finished, and the place emptied. Farmers used the sale money to buy necessities from Chinese shops and returned home. A dozen smaller villages surrounded Snay Pol. It was a business centre of the district. Many peasants from neighbouring villages came to shop at any time of the day. Most of them enjoyed the trust and confidence of the shop owners as long as their business relationship lasted. Very often, goods were not all paid for in cash.

Even at night, some farmers would come and knock on the shop door and take home whatever they needed: gas, cooking oil, salt, fish sauce, agricultural tools, medicines, clothing, soft drinks, or alcohol. The Chinese shop owners were very patient. They just kept records and waited until the harvest time, in January or February next year, to clear all accounts. The peasants would pay interest and principal debts with the crops. After clearing all debts, the surplus would be saved for next year′s consumption and for contingency. Those who harvested good crops got a greater surplus and could afford to buy new clothes or new tools and improve their living conditions. Fixing their houses, or purchasing a new bicycle and a radio set, was a sign of a better life. Peasants

at that time earned just enough to pay their debts. Most of them owned their land both for farming and housing. But some did not succeed in paying all their debts each year, to the point that the accumulation of debts plus interest resulted in the confiscation of the land by the Chinese creditors. Those in this category would work for the new landowners and receive shared crops in return. They lived in an economic system that kept them working closely with the Chinese shop owners, who were the masters of the market. The Chinese fixed the prices of goods and commodities based on their connections with the nationwide Chinese network. Through the network, the Chinese supplied goods to the village. In theory, the system was a market economy. But the Cambodians were always demanding, and the Chinese were always offering. And demands were always unlimited, thus always exceeding offers.

Even in a small village like Snay Pol, those Chinese whose great adaptability facilitated their integration into the community dominated our economy. After two generations, they were completely integrated. If Chinese men could not speak Khmer

fluently, their wives or children did very well. Chinese families in the village were mainly Buddhist. The older women went to the same pagoda and sponsored religious ceremonies like their fellow Cambodian villagers. Later, the Chinese would marry their daughters to Cambodian boys who got jobs within the government civil service. In those earlier days of my childhood, for many Cambodian farmer families, sending children to school was not a high priority. Parents needed them to help keep cattle, cows, or buffalo. But for those who did, they were well rewarded, as their boys would earn positions within the government after graduation and, in turn, would help support their families. In the 1950s, anyone who graduated from a primary school could become a schoolteacher. In the 1960s, the ordinary schoolteacher position required at least the successful completion of the High School's 9th grade, which was attested by a nationwide annual examination. Holding a higher diploma would give access to a higher position. The monthly pay of a schoolteacher was equivalent to about USD 100, which was considered good pay and quite high compared with the standard income of an ordinary Cambodian. The schoolteacher position was so popular that any

Chinese businessman in the village would offer his daughter to marry its holder. The newly appointed bachelor schoolteacher was immediately high on the wanted list and would receive a motorbike as a present if he were to accept the hand of the businessman's daughter. The other positions within the government were also in high demand. But at the same level of position, only that of the schoolteacher was spread out in almost every village. In my generation, the Cambodian cohabitation with the Chinese community was trouble-free, and the Sino-Cambodians were well accepted as ordinary Cambodian citizens. In general, we did not have any problems with any ethnic groups in the village.

Racial and Religious Harmonisation

In addition to the two families who ran the transportation businesses, two other Vietnamese families lived in the village: one as a tailor and the other as a farmer raising pigs, growing vegetables, and selling Vietnamese foods. The Vietnamese were still considered more foreign than the Chinese, as the Vietnamese

did not practise the same Buddhist religion and did not go to the same pagoda. The last ethnic group consisted of two Muslim families whose main occupation was selling beef exclusively. The distribution of work was that the Chinese would deal with pigs and the Muslims with cows, as the Islamic religion prohibits Muslims from eating pork. In Cambodia, we called the Muslims "Cham" or "people from Champa," emigrants coming from an early neighbouring Hindu Kingdom that turned to Islam in the central part of Annam, which Vietnam annihilated in the 17th century. According to a history book, the last king of Champa, with most of his men, fled under pressure from the Annamites into Cambodian territory in 1720[2]. The Muslims were completely integrated into the Cambodian community under the official name "Islamic Khmer." The Cham, or Islamic Khmer, enjoyed the same rights as the Cambodians. In Snay Pol, the three communities cohabited peacefully and enjoyed excellent inter-religious and inter-racial relationships.

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[2]D G Hall, A History of South-East Asia, Third Edition, London, 1968, p. 194

The Civilization of Villagers

The Lower Snay Pol borders a small river or stream called "Stung Snay Pol," where some families can make their living by fishing. The village was also known for good Cambodian traditional noodles, "Num Banh Tiock." The noodles are made with only rice flour, no egg, and are consumed with fish soup prepared with citronella ingredients. Snay Pol noodles were so famous that important people would come from different cities to buy and eat them. Two or three families lived off the selling of this traditional noodle, earning enough money to send their children to further their studies in the capital, Phnom Penh. Other families made their living as rice or tobacco retailers. They bought rice in a 100 kg bag from two rice mills in the village and sold it, kg by kg, in other villages along the Mekong River, 40 to 50 km from home. Most men would begin their daily work early in the morning, between 4 and 5 a.m. carrying the 100 kg bag of rice on the back seat of their bicycles and spending their time selling rice from village to village. From the Mekong villages, some bought many kg of

tobacco to sell it in retail at home. They returned home around 2 p.m. to find their pretty wives waiting with a smile and some preparation, including a silk sarong (sarong is a kind of robe, in cotton or in silk, commonly used by the Chams as their daily clothes; non-peasant Cambodians wear a sarong as pyjama when staying home) and a perfumed soap for a relaxing bath.

The people living in that part of the village had the same lifestyle as any city dweller, in a "modernised" style. In fact, those people enjoyed dancing, playing music, and practising collective sports: soccer or volleyball. At the Cambodian New Year festival in mid-April of every year, they would spend the three nights in the street, dancing the traditional Ram Vong (dance in circle) (Cambodians celebrate the New Year for three days) using a drum, a guitar, or a mandolin (depending on which one they found available) and an accordion as musical instruments.

The village was also home to most of the district officials. The privileged ones took their daily breakfast at the only coffee shop that existed in the village, before going to work. The breakfast normally consisted of a single cup of black coffee or coffee with

milk and/or a bowl of Chinese noodles. No ordinary people or peasants could afford to take that kind of breakfast regularly. Only some schoolteachers and some district officials did. One of them, working as the district accountant, ran an indoor traditional and popular theatre called "Lakon Bassac" (a kind of Beijing opera in which actors play their roles in different personages, talking and singing). The troupe was composed of dozens of actors, musicians, and workers. Every day, between 3 and 4 p.m., some actors dressed as the personage of the moment, according to the role they would play later, accompanied by the noisy sounds of a big drum, showed up on the main street to announce the night's performance. They took an ox cart or horse cart to proceed across the village. A few years later, assigned actors would show up in a two-wheeled vehicle towed by a motorbike to advertise their show. From 6:00 p.m., we can hear noisy, uninterrupted, and repeated sounds of big drums from the theatre that kept the whole village alert for the upcoming art event while the theatre officials were selling entrance tickets.

The 1st class ticket costs about USD 0.30, giving rights to the 1st rank chair next to the stage. The lowest class ticket costs about USD 0.03, giving access to the last stair, almost 3 m high against the wall. The sounds of the drums were so exciting and created a crazy temptation that many children of my generation could not resist, insisting that our parents bring us to see the show or find our own way inside the theatre building, which was made of bamboo and covered with thatch. The simplest way to attend the show for free was to sneak in through any hole found in the wall. Each time before the troupe performed a new drama or comedy, the producer would add new acts and assign roles to each actor or actress to play different personages. There was no manuscript. Once they received an assigned role, actors/actresses would improvise based on their experience and knowledge of art. This role attribution took place most often on Sunday mornings. Some children, including myself, came to listen to the discussion from beginning to end until the preferred actor/actress was free, so that we could talk to him/her in private. The life of an artist was no better than that of an ordinary villager. The most popular star of the troupe earned far less than the schoolteacher. In general, the

Cambodian Buddhist culture favours monkhood rather than modern life. The theatre was the only entertainment we had in the village. Later on, in the mid-1960s, TV took its place, and little by little our theatre disappeared.

Like in other Cambodian villages, Buddhism was prosperous in Snay Pol. The Pagoda was the centre of social activities. Important events took place there. People went either to Snay Pol Pagoda in the upper part of the village or to Rokar Pagoda in a neighbouring village. My grandmother and my parents went to Rokar Pagoda, whose chief monk was a close friend of the family. Real Buddhists who practised the religion, especially elderly people, went to the pagoda once a week on Buddha Day to give offerings, mainly food, to Buddhist monks and receive from them the five or eight Buddhist precepts called "Sila." On that day, they abstained from eating after noon. In the afternoon, they would spend time praying or listening to various Buddhist teachings recited by Buddhist monks. But for children, Buddhism was a very simple religion as taught by our parents: "In heaven, one angel is watching us and keeping records of all our actions. "Depending on

our deeds, whether good or bad, as confirmed by the record, we will go to heaven or hell after we die." "Past good deeds help us in the present, while bad ones make our lives difficult."

The Ieng Family

My birthplace was in the middle of the two parts of Snay Pol, where there were only a dozen houses surrounded by rice fields. Our family house was built in the first decade of the 20th century. It was made entirely of wood and covered with ancient tiles. It was among a few big houses of the village. Its round columns were in smooth brown wood. The walls were also wooden and were constructed carefully so that not a single fixing nail could be seen. The principal house was added at the front by a veranda and at the back by a kitchen. Inside, cupboards carved with traditional decorative figures separated large rooms. The house belonged to my maternal grandfather, Yin Uch, who was a notable in the village, as he served year after year in many administrative

functions: chief of the commune, tax officer, chief of an administrative centre, member of the consultative assembly of the Kingdom, and finally a bailiff. I did not know him because he died when I was still a small baby.

Even living in a village like Snay Pol, my grandfather took an aristocratic way of life. He had a cook, a maid, and a driver who drove a light oxcart, the fast one. He was married to the daughter of another notable family in the district, my grandmother, Oung Kou. Through their marriage, they had seven children: five girls and two boys. My mother, Sokhar, was the third eldest of the seven. All attended school, but not all the girls had completed primary school. Only one of my four aunts, Samedy, got a primary school certificate and became a schoolteacher. My two uncles studied further and obtained proper positions in the civil service. Parents at that time did not want to send their daughters to school. Some preferred to keep them at home so they could learn household duties in preparation for their future role as a good wife. Others might fear that sending girls to school would be out of control, since they could not know how their daughters behaved

outside the home. My mother did not finish primary school, but she can read and write basic Cambodian correctly. She was raised under the protection of tradition.

As teenagers, girls had to stay in the shade, cut off from the rays of the sun. In every movement outside, young ladies must be accompanied. Girls could hardly talk to boys. At that time, parents arranged their children´s marriages. The future couple did not need to know each other beforehand. Normally, the boy´s family asked for the girl´s hand. If the girl´s parents accepted, the boy´s family would give a present or gift in gold or money, rice, or other commodities, in accordance with the conditions agreed upon during the negotiations. In addition to the present, the groom candidate must spend some time on probation, working for the girl´s family. The duration of probation generally lasts for one year. During this period of probation, if the girl´s parents were not satisfied with the performance of the groom, they could refuse, at any moment, the hand of their daughter. While reversing their decision, they could still keep all the presents or gifts they had received. It was under that strict tradition that my parents were

married. It was the opposite of the 1960s, when Chinese shop owners married their daughters to Cambodian boys.

My father, Ieng Muth, came from a smaller village in a neighbouring commune bordering the small river "Tonle Tauch." He originated from a farming family of Grandfather Kong Ieng and Grandmother Hu Or: a family of six children, with two girls and four boys. My father was the fourth and youngest boy in the family. Except for the two girls, all received Buddhist education as they entered monkhood at an early age. Between the ages of 13 and 15, they became novice Buddhist monks. They would live in the pagoda, learning Buddhist teachings, Cambodian literature, calculus, as well as vocational training such as carpentry, art, painting, or traditional medicine, until the age of 18. Between 18 and 21, the novices can either leave their monkhood or continue as more mature ones, called "Bhikku." As ordinary boys, they would come back home and stay with their parents, helping them with farming work. Any former novice monk was called "Chee." At 21, some Chee would reenter the monkhood and become "Bhikku." Others would definitely leave the monastic life, get

married, and found families. But a Bhikkhu might later decide to quit monkhood at any moment or continue it until the end of their life. My father and his brothers were all Bhikkhus. One of his elder brothers, Ieng Bun, lived as a Buddhist monk until he died in 1974. After some years, my father and his two other brothers renounced the life of Bhikku. Any former Bhikku was called "Banditt," the scholar, or commonly called "Anteeth."

At 28, my father left the monkhood and began to work as a farmer, helping my grandmother, who became a widow after my grandfather died. When the time came to get married, he was 30 years old, an old boy to marry. My mother was 18. The two families arranged the marriage. My father did not know my mother, and vice versa. My father's family did pay a high price in terms of gifts, as their situation was quite different from that of my mother's family. In addition, before the wedding took place, my father had to prove to his future parents-in-law every skill he had. He had to work full time, 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and stand ready for any mission 24 hours a day. During his one-year probation, he not only had to work hard, especially in the rice

fields, but he also had no right to talk to or see his future wife. Finally, my father passed the examination successfully. The wedding took place in 1945.

The probation was a good experience for my father, as, in the end, he gained confidence and trust from his father-in-law. Immediately after the marriage, my grandfather trained him to become his successor as a bailiff. The bailiff in Cambodia was an independent court officer whose responsibilities included implementing court judgments or sentences, especially in civil litigation, as well as maintaining order in the courtroom. The office could be transmitted from father to son or sold. The function of bailiff was later confirmed, through a nationwide examination, by a committee presided over by the minister of justice. Just a year before I was born, my father inherited the office of bailiff from my maternal grandfather. The latter died a few months after my birth.

In Cambodia, we bear the family name first and the given name immediately after it. The family name is established either by the name of the grandfather or the name of the father. My father used his father's name as the family name, Ieng, so his full name

became Ieng Muth. I was told that Grandfather Ieng was a man of many professions. When he was young, he learned the martial arts and specialised in using a stick or cane. In the late years of the nineteenth century, one of the young Ieng´s uncles was a chief of the commune and was a master of martial arts.

As a master of martial arts, he was constantly sought by competitors who travelled from faraway villages to test their skill against his, keeping him very busy and his life full of deadly fighting. So the uncle decided to set a rule prohibiting his relatives from learning any martial art. But for those who dared to violate the rule, the only condition was to measure their skill against the commune chief, and if they beat him, they would be allowed to stay in the commune. Those violators would be punished with exile if they failed to beat the chief. My grandfather failed many times in the contest, and each time he was defeated, he was forced to leave the village for several years. Finally, he beat his uncle after he met a female master in her thirties who had trained him until he was able to jump up to two or three meters high. Since that time of victory over his uncle, Ieng was authorised to

live in the village named Mesor Prachan until the end of his life. I was also told that his good and skilful experience in martial arts once saved his life from a tiger attack in the forest next to the village. Three months after the attack, he successfully avenged the tiger by killing the animal after a deadly fight lasting several hours. I saw the dried skin of the tiger, which was exhibited on the wall of the kudi (monk house) of my uncle, the senior Buddhist monk, Ieng Bun, in a Phnom Penh pagoda, Saravone Decho, in the 1960s. Maybe it was for the same reason that my grandfather never taught, nor allowed his children, including my father, to be taught, the martial arts. However, martial arts skills once brought my grandfather to the Royal Palace, where he served as a Maha Thlek (royal servant) for a while. In the later years of his life, he worked as the master of ceremonies in the pagoda of his village. At that time, the pagoda owned a racing boat, with my grandfather as captain of the rowers' team. As is practised today, boat racing was a very popular sport, and the whole village supported the team. The captain normally trains his teammates but does not participate in rowing. He sits in the boat in front of his colleagues and gives signals for a regular or accelerated rowing rhythm so

the team rows in the same movement. Spectators might see the captain dancing each time he makes a gesture to his teammates, using his oar up and down, fast and slow. As a master of ceremonies in a pagoda, commonly called "Achar," or the teacher, my grandfather was one of the respected figures in the village.

My parents had eleven children, with nine boys and two girls. I was the third in the family. My brothers and sisters were raised in accordance with the traditions and customs of the village. I was born as a premature baby. In my case, my mother had only a seven-month pregnancy. Each time my mother gave birth to her child, she was under the care of the same old lady in her sixties, named Grandmother Ka, the only midwife in the village. The midwife performed her duties in an ancestral way that had been perpetuated in our society, from generation to generation.

Giving Birth in Snay Pol

Giving birth was deadly risky. Common Cambodians called it "Chhlang Tonle," "swimming across the river." The mother and/or the baby could sink and die. In the 1950s, in Snay Pol, there was only one nurse, who was the highest health officer of the district, but no midwife trained in the modern healthcare school. When sick, many people preferred to resort to traditional medicine rather than consult the nurse. At the moment of birth, when the mother was in labour, no men would be allowed to stay in the same room. In the next room, the father was preparing a special wooden bed under which he burned charcoal in three baked-clay stoves. Charcoal in the fire would keep the bed warm. In the minutes after the birth, the mother would rest in the warm bed for three days. Keeping charcoal in the fire, burning firewood, or keeping the warmth for his wife was the responsibility of any husband. His responsibility within the union would be tested throughout this special event. No good husband would miss this special event in life. In a sense, the responsibility was translated into being fully in

charge of the birth materially, psychologically, financially, and legally. The midwife would work with the assistance of some women she found at hand. She might recommend using traditional medicines prepared with herbs and plants blended with rice alcohol. My mother preferred drinking rum instead of medicinal alcohol. To protect and beautify the skin of the new mother, the midwife would recommend applying saffron powder mixed with herbs and rice alcohol to her body.

After three days, the stoves could be removed from under the bed, and there was no need to continue burning charcoal or firewood. Cambodians called this stove removal "Tumleak Changkran." Mother could have a rest for as long as she needed. Father did not find a name for the newborn baby. Our tradition did not favour giving names to the would-be newborn; in contrast to Western civilisation, where a baby gets his name several months before he is born. Maybe our ancestors wanted to make sure that any newborn would survive the first week or month of birth before giving him a name, taking into account the high rate of infant mortality. Some fathers consulted friends, Buddhist monks, the

village chief, or the commune chief to obtain the desired name for their children. It was the same for the declaration of birth, which was generally not immediately done.

In some cases, the father declared the birth of his child a month later, to the point where he forgot the corresponding birth date in the Gregorian calendar and accepted any date given on the spot by the commune chief or any officer in charge. Frequently, the officer recorded the date of declaration as the birth date. But generally, many parents perfectly remembered the hour, day, month, and year of their children's birth, referring to the traditional calendar. Many young Cambodians kept this birth date in mind for life, as it would be used for astrologer consultation. However, what was told and what was stated in the official certificate were sometimes not the same. Since my childhood, my father told me that I was born on Tuesday in the month of Assoja (September and October) in the Tiger year. My birth certificate read, "2 November 1950." Thirty years later, I found the exact date, the 24th of October 1950, corresponding to the traditional calendar that my father had told me.

In the past, ordinary villagers did not celebrate their birthdays. In our family, my parents did not organise any special ceremony on the occasion of each child's birth. Still, children received benediction many times a year, as Buddhist monks were invited to perform this religious act whenever my father was told by his astrologer. In fact, the astrologer came to visit us three or four times a year from a neighbouring village named Prey Pnov Village, which is about 10 km down the road to Prey Veng. Grandfather Yee, or in Cambodian "Ta Yee," was the astrologer's name. He was a kind of confidant of the family. He would predict good or bad fortune and make recommendations accordingly. My father followed the astrologer's recommendations, whether to keep good luck coming or to chase away evil monsters or ghosts. The most common recommendation was to invite a Buddhist monk to give a benediction or a blessing to the whole family or to an individual member, or to take a holy bath provided by a senior monk, the head of a pagoda. We had the same senior monk who came to provide everything every time we needed. He was the head of Rokar Pagoda. Our religious practice was more Brahman-like than truly Buddhist, as Brahmanism had entered Cambodia in the early

days of Cambodian history, long before most people practiced Buddhism, and our population confused the two religions in their daily religious rituals.

My Childhood and My Father´s Works

I grew up surrounded by my two parents, two elder brothers, Chhoeun and Sinoeun, my maternal grandmother, and my aunt, Samedy, my mother's youngest sister. My paternal grandmother, Hu Or, died a year after my eldest brother, Chhoeun, was born. We lived in the same big house, but unlike my grandparents, my parents did not have a maid, a cook, or a driver. The light oxcart was already outmoded. We were entering into an era of bicycles and motorcycles. My mother took care of the household, assisted by one or two of my father´s nieces, depending on the needs. Those cousins came from my father´s village and might have been staying with us for one or two years. One cousin who helped take care of me during my childhood was Chhrouk, with whom I had no

memory, as I was too small to know her well. But my mother told me some years later that Chhrouk was attending her three final-year classes at the primary school of our village. She spent her spare time from school helping carry me from one place to another or entertaining me by playing or singing. After primary school, cousin Chhrouk attended the national health-care school and became a professional midwife. She married a businessman and probably died under the Khmer Rouge, as we had no sight of her afterward. While my mother was busy feeding me with her natural milk and taking care of my two brothers, as well as doing other household work, including cooking, my father was dividing his time between working at home and travelling. He was absent from home many days a month, as he had to attend the courthouse in the provincial capital, Prey Veng, and travel to other districts to implement the court judgments. The province was divided into ten administrative districts, and there were only three bailiffs for the whole provincial territory. So the distribution of work implied that three districts, namely Pearang, Sithor Kandal, and Kanchrieach, fell under my father's jurisdiction. As a bailiff, he was not paid a

fixed salary but in honoraria. Therefore, our family had no fixed income.

In those days, my father could not afford to buy a new motorbike. Most of the time, he used a second-hand one. Often his motorbike broke down on the road in the middle of the forest or the rice fields, forcing him to walk the machine for many kilometres until he reached a repair shop. Sometimes, he came home late, walking his motorbike along. Many times, he had complained about using second-hand equipment. He never had a chance to enjoy a brand-new one. The best he could do was complain less; his second-hand French-made motorbike called "Mobilette," which he kept in use until 1970, even though Japanese-made motorbikes had invaded our village since the middle of the 1960s.

My father hired an aide who knew how to read and write to help him deliver court citations to the parties, the plaintiff and the defendant. He paid his aide by the day. To implement the court judgments, he always needed assistance from the local authorities, mainly the police. Most of the cases dealt with divorce and debts, which led to the removal of properties. In some cases,

my father had to hire workers to help dismantle an entire house so it could be put up for sale. Sometimes, he had to confiscate buffalo or cows from their owners so that the debts in the litigation could be settled. In all cases, the presence of the police officers was unavoidable. My father´s job was a risky one, as some losing parties might use violence against him in response to his actions. Thanks to his permanent contacts with the authorities, he became one of the few notables in the village.

At home, he used to work like an attorney at law, giving legal consultation or helping a plaintiff prepare his case. He received his clients in the main room of the house, decorated with two giant wild-cow heads and a large glass door behind his desk. Prey Veng Province was rated as one of the places with many cases in court. Most of my father´s clients were peasants. They generally travelled by bicycle from different regions of the three districts, whether to have a legal consultation or to present the court judgment for implementation. While travelling, male clients did not yet wear pants, but only wore a krama, just covering their underpants, because wearing pants would get dirty with the dust or mud they

could encounter on the road. The pants (in general, a piece of pyjamas made with smooth material in black called "Khor Lanh") must be clean and ready to be worn at any meeting with important people. Usually, when a client arrived at our house's front door, he placed his bike against the fence. He began to change his clothes by removing the krama, to replace it with the "Khor Lanh" that he had managed to bring along, and fastening it to the bicycle handlebar. Once he felt he had a smart appearance, he entered the house. This was a sign of high consideration or politeness that peasants wanted to show to important district officials. Eventually, this respectful gesture could be accompanied by some coconuts, jackfruit, bananas, or other fruits as a gift.

My father would spend the rest of his spare time gardening and planting fruit trees, mostly coconut, mango, and jack trees, on a plot of land he had just bought next to the existing backyard. We had no running water for either consumption or agricultural work. People needed to dig a well or a pond to obtain or keep water. Our family had a medium-sized pond, 50 m from the house, inherited from my grandfather. We used a dozen big jars to keep rainwater

for daily consumption until the next rainy season. When the rainwater ran short, we hired a coolie to carry water from a well in a neighbouring house, 200 m away. I learned some time later that not many people would be eager to be hired as our coolies, fearing being called "convicted prisoners." As in the past during my grandfather's time, the district jail official, a friend of the family, used to send those prisoners to work in our house, especially to carry water.

My First Day at School and Our Respect for Teachers

When I reached the age of 6, I managed to get my enrollment in school. There was no pre-school or nursery school in the village. Children would be admitted to grade one only at the age of 7. Many feared school, and their first day in school was generally dramatic, with crying and tears. The decision on when I should go to school belonged to my aunt, Samedy, who was

teaching the superior class[3] at the only district elementary school. She was an attractive, beautiful, and young lady, a model of the village. Like my two brothers, I was excited at 6 about the idea of attending school. But my parents preferred to send me to school only after my 7th birthday. One day, Aunty was washing her clothes in the backyard; I went next to her, showing my right hand behind my head to touch my left ear.

I shouted to her, "Eh, Eh, Aunty, my arm is long enough, and I can touch my ear now." The rule of the time for a child was that he had to wait until he had grown big enough for his right arm to reach his left ear when placed over his head, to be sent to school. So, the rule was to put the arm over, not around, behind the head like what I did. My aunt looked at me, smiling, and she said, "Do it again." I repeated the same movement. She nodded her head again, smiling, and said, "You're kidding. But okay, tomorrow, you go to school with me." The next day, early in the morning, she put me on the back seat of her bicycle and brought me to school.

[3] It is equivalent to Grade Six.

I was so proud to attend the 1st day of school, accompanied by the most beautiful lady in the village.

I enjoyed my years in primary school. By the 4th grade, we started to learn French, and from the 6th grade, almost all of our homework was in French. Knowing French was a sign of being "intellectual." To be regarded as intellectual, many Cambodians spoke Khmer mixed with a few words of French. Our tradition gave much respect to teachers. Teachers were considered the second parents in our society. By order, the teacher was placed third behind the Buddha and both parents, the father and the mother, to whom we had to pay most respect. Any artist before performing his art must first pay homage to his teacher, whether physical or spiritual. A schoolteacher enjoyed the same status vis-à-vis his student. The tradition helped him tremendously in his job, as schoolboys or schoolgirls had to listen to and obey what the teacher said. Even though our teachers often employed violent methods that were not very pedagogical for teaching, in every classroom, three or four rotten or wooden whips or sticks hung on the wall or lay on the teacher's desk, ready to be used to hit any

bad student who dared not remember his lessons. Some teachers were so mad at us, little human creatures who were so afraid to the point where we would avoid them in the street or in public places. But students kept for life the memory of the teaching benefits they received from their teachers.

One year later, my aunt Samedy got married to a customs officer, a native of the lower village. I did not know how they knew each other, as the officer was working in Phnom Penh. Immediately after the wedding, she moved out and went to live with her husband in the capital. Since my parents' wedding, the tradition had evolved. There was no need for the groom to work in probation anymore. Once both parties agreed, the wedding could take place at any moment. However, the tradition still recommended that families consult an astrologer on the auspicious wedding days. The bride was not obliged to stay in the shade, as my mother had done more than a decade ago. Despite some changes, the tradition remained the same for the three-day wedding ceremony. A few days before D-Day, we were very busy with the preparations. A dozen of ladies, group by group, were

busy making special, traditional cakes or delicacies. Workers were coming into the courtyard to erect a huge tent decorated with coconut branches and leaves. The tent would host a banquet for about a hundred guests. Another smaller tent was also installed. It would be used as a lodge for the groom during the ceremony.

From the lodge, musicians who could be comedians and singers as well would perform their art for the whole ceremony, playing integral Cambodian traditional music and singing popular and folkloric songs. In the backyard, they dug a dozen holes for stoves on which they would place the cooking pots so that the chef could prepare the feast. At the age of 7, I was amazed at the sight of that enormous preparation. While I was looking at those workers undertaking their jobs, one question came to mind. Why, in the village, did no one think to create a permanent big hall, fully decorated and equipped with sufficient chairs and tables to accommodate guests, a hall that we could hire for that kind of ceremony? I thought, "It would be a good business." I did not realize that such a hall had already existed in some hotels in Phnom Penh.

Activities after School Hours

My aunt left, but our home received newcomers. Our family was growing year after year. Before I moved to Phnom Penh in 1964, I had two sisters, Vanny, who was born in 1952, and Sithan, in 1954, and four brothers: Vannak, in 1956, Naroeun, in 1959, Vuthean, in 1962, and Vutheun, in 1964. Two other little brothers were born after I left the village: Vuthea, in 1966, and Sophear, in 1970. During those years, we were growing up surrounded by our best friends, cats and dogs (a dozen in all). In some years, my father had transformed our residence into a real farm as he raised, in addition, a cow or a horse not for work, but certainly for the natural fertilizers he needed for his garden. We also raised some chickens and ducks. A fence like the one in the front did not limit the compound behind the house, but it was surrounded by bushes and a score of bamboo and palm trees, providing shelter to a variety of birds, such as crows, sparrows, and turtle-doves. We used to go around the palm trees to collect fallen, ripe fruits for my mother to make palm cakes or palm jellies. We could not climb

the palm trees, as they were tall, up to 20 m or more. On one of the tallest, a couple of storks made their nest.

One morning, I found on the ground not only the two or three ripe palm fruits as usual but also a baby stork crying desperately with unheard sounds, probably because of repeated long efforts to cry. The baby made no move, and I took him home. So we also raised a stork among our best friends, except that the stork was fed with fish. Day after day and month after month, the stork became friendly to us, like the dogs that followed us everywhere when we were walking or welcomed us when we were coming home from school. The stork had lived with us until the day he was able to fly on his own to find his liberty.

For some period of time, we also raised a female monkey. In addition to the usual cries of dying pigs every morning, the monkey woke our family up from the early hours. We did not keep her in a cage, but at night she was attached with a 2m-long chain to one of the two supporting wooden columns of a hammock on the veranda. Every morning, the monkey jumped endlessly from one extremity to the other or just moved the supporting elements

of the hammock to make unbearable noises, to the point where we woke up and shouted, telling her to stop. During the daytime, we released her to enjoy her freedom. The monkey lived in harmony with the other animals. She made friends, especially with dogs. Usually, after lunch, when many adults took a siesta, the monkey spent her time with dogs or cats, finding or catching fleas or other insects, or cleaning their fur.

One day, one of our dogs gave birth to five babies. The monkey loved the puppies very much. She spent a lot of time caring for and playing with them. A few days later, while my parents were taking their usual nap after a noon meal, I was doing some homework in my room next to my parents'. I heard loud, uninterrupted barking from a group of dogs. It was so intense that I had to stop working and rush to see what was happening. From my room window, I could already see the movement of two or three dogs running around a large tamarind tree, 20 m behind our kitchen. When I arrived, the three dogs continued barking, especially the mother that had given birth a few days ago. They were jumping, trying to climb up to the upper part of the tree. Over

there, on one of the middle branches, the monkey was sitting quietly, with one hand holding carefully a puppy about a week old and the other searching for fleas for it. The puppy was in a comfortable hand but attempted timidly to cry from time to time. To convince the monkey to bring the puppy back to its mother, I managed to get from the kitchen a banana, show it to her, call her by every name that came out of my mind (we did give names to our dogs and cats, but not to other animals) and promise to give her the banana as a reward if my appeal were to be heard. The monkey´s first response was grimacing, with funny movements in her mouth and eyes. She repeated the same gesture each time I talked to her. Finally, after almost half an hour, the monkey decided to climb down slowly, holding it carefully as always, and placing it on the ground, to the great relief and happiness of his mother. A few months later, we decided to donate the monkey to a pagoda in a neighbouring village. We believed she would find peace and freedom with the Buddhist monks in the pagoda and in the forest nearby.

During my childhood, I liked playing very much, as being a teacher, a Buddhist monk, or sometimes a king or chief of state, with other children. I liked to play any role that required others to pay respect. I used to imitate the chief of state, then Prince Sihanouk (former king of Cambodia), because the prince had dominated our whole lives since Cambodia became independent in November 1953. During my childhood, he came to the village twice. Many times a day, we heard his improvised, hour-long speeches on the radio. At the time, the Cambodian people venerated him as a god.

I also used to make my own film using my own technique. In fact, we had no projector. I used a looking glass to shimmer the light of a candle or a burning oil lamp in a dark room. On the glass, I put different forms on paper according to the stories I was telling. Through the gleam, the forms would reflect their shadows on the screen, which was usually the wall of the room. The forms could be animals, men, women, or objects. I could move the forms up and down, left and right, or slow and fast so that the shadows would be in motion. Jokes or exaggerated comments often

accompanied the shadows I made on the spot to entertain, especially my younger sisters and brothers. I became the elder when my two brothers left to further their studies in Phnom Penh, after they had completed their years of primary school in the village.

The life of our villagers was amazing with the arrival of electricity. It was in the early years of the 1960s when a local businessman took the initiative to invest in an electricity business in Snay Pol. A first 15-20 KVA generator was running to provide electricity only for lighting, from 5 a.m. to 6 a.m. and from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., and not for any other kind of consumption. Later, the businessman upgraded the power to 30 KWA. Our family subscribed to a fluorescent lamp of 0.30 m, for which we paid about USD 1 a month. With one lamp, we could only provide enough light for the main room, which was arranged as a lounge and as my father's office. The light could also penetrate other rooms, as the lamp was placed up to the roof, high over the cupboards. Our house had no ceiling. But the lighting intensity was not sufficient in those rooms. So, to do my homework at night,

I had to move to the main room, using my father´s desk. Many times, I fell asleep until the next morning. To avoid this kind of inconvenience, one day, I managed to get an extra light by myself. I just bought a bulb lamp from a Chinese shop and connected it to the power supply line, using not the electric wire but the ordinary one I found available in the house. My parents never questioned my ingenuity, and I had no sense of electrocution. For many weeks, I had gotten extra lighting without paying. I thought I was doing what others did. But they did it properly. I used the electricity free of charge for many weeks until the day I noticed that the exposed end of the connecting wire was reddening and catching fire. I was very frightened that this might have set fire to my ancestor´s house. I did not tell my parents about the incident, which I managed to end quickly and quietly.

My Earlier Initiation to Politics

In general, there was no public lighting in my village. But at night, with some lights coming from the fluorescent lamps in the neighboring houses, the main street looked lit; we could see, from time to time, some bicycle or motorbike riders or walkers passing through. People were enjoying more nocturnal activities than before. From the veranda, almost every time, I could see any unannounced visitor who might be coming. If someone arrived, I would alert my father. Most often after dinner, many of our neighbours came to visit us, spending time chatting with him until they fell exhausted and went back home. They were generally talking about politics, curiously more international than domestic. They analysed the world situation from the Korean War to the Congolese conflict, or from the wars in neighbouring Laos and Vietnam to the nuclear race. They also commented on the roles played by the giants of the world: the USSR, the USA, France, the UK, China, etc. Their comments were mainly based on the news they got from the radio, which broadcast the information three

times a day. And the comments were no different from those of our chief of state, who managed to make his voice heard nearly every day through the national radio, the only channel at the time, when he was visiting his fellow citizens in different parts of his kingdom.

On national politics, my father and his neighbours rarely debated, except to make comments about individual ministers or important people whom they knew personally or whom they had just heard about. But in general, they praised the man who ran the country, Prince Sihanouk, who was regarded as the father of the nation. I learned that kind of world politics by listening to every evening discussion as I served them hot jasmine tea. I also learned, some years later, that my father had been a candidate for the post of deputy in an election organised by the prince's party, "Sangkum Reastr Niyum," or "The Popular Community." But he failed to get elected.

The chief of the district convened a weekly meeting of all the chiefs of communes in his office, called "Sala Srok." We had ten "Khum" or communes. The chief of my father's native commune

was his cousin. Every time, after the meeting, the cousin came to visit us either for lunch or just for an informal chat. He came by bicycle and, years later, by motorbike as his finances permitted. He used to park his bicycle or motorbike under the veranda and then go up the stairs to meet my father in the office. While the cousin was busy chatting upstairs, I was given the immense pleasure of controlling the cousin's belongings. On the back seat of the bicycle or motorbike, I usually found a pile of weekly magazines, especially the one published by the state, entitled "Neak Cheat Niyum" or "The Nationalist," attached with an elastic cord. Since I could read and write, I had always taken one or two copies of "The Nationalist" from the middle of the pile, and the commune chief never noticed. I enjoyed reading a few articles and many pictures that showed the government's activities. I was very interested in the international news, which helped me better understand the subject my father and his neighbours were debating every afternoon. I liked the cartoon portraying the "giants," among whom the most publicized were Eisenhower, Khrushchev, and De Gaulle. The cartoon about Prince Sihanouk

and his ministers also drew much of my attention. This was my earlier initiation to politics.

I Like to Make Merit

When I reached the 6th grade, my parents began to notice my patience and my talent for drawing, painting, and reading. I liked to draw or paint animals, houses, cars, trees, and landscapes of the countryside, the seaside, or the riverside, etc., often using watercolours. But most importantly, I painted the Buddha in different versions and in different actions from his holy life. My grandmother and my mother were very enthusiastic when they saw my paintings. They encouraged me to paint more so that I could distribute my works to the older adults in the village. They said this was a great deed that could take me to heaven in my next life. I was also good at reading, as I read the Buddhist teachings in the same way as any Buddhist monk did.

One day, I was on a trip to a neighbouring village with my grandmother. In the guesthouse, I found an old Buddhist textbook. I chose one chapter and started to read loudly, clearly, but slowly, with correct punctuation and intonation. While I was reading, a dozen elderly ladies came and sat down respectfully and quietly around me. One of them lit a lighter to burn a scent and put it in front of me, giving the impression of being in a real session of a religious ceremony. They were treating me like a real monk. In this situation, I dared not stop, but continued reading until the end. Once again, my grandmother told me that my actions were a great deed. I was attracted to Buddhism to the point where I was about to choose between entering monkhood as a novice or furthering my studies in high school at the age of 13. Finally, I chose the latter. Even though I was always ready to do good deeds in a Buddhist way, I often drove my father´s "Mobilette" and when I saw an elderly person or a Buddhist monk walking alone under the hot sun, I would volunteer to carry them to their destination. I was always ready to render service at the drop of a hat.

I Like Reading Books

Next to our house, in the west, lived one of our cousins. He had two children younger than me. He had just built a new house and changed his job. For many years, he had been a technician, assembling or repairing bicycles and selling their spare parts. As bicycle businesses declined because many people now used more and more motorbikes, he decided to close his bike shop and open a bookstore, which was the second in the village. In the bookstore, he sold stationery, school textbooks, Buddhist textbooks, and some novels. From time to time, we could find some magazines, but no updated newspapers. More and more books were accumulating week after week. Since the bookstore opened, I had spent most of my spare time helping my cousin and his wife, putting books in order by title, subject, or author, and eventually selling them to customers. I also took advantage of the chance to read almost every Khmer book available in the store. I read not only educational or informative books but also novels written by well-known authors and young writers. I read all kinds

of books, from sex education and cartoons and comics to the most reliable ones. I was so absorbed in reading that I spent more and more time in the bookstore than at home. Most of the time, my mother had to shout from the veranda to call me for lunch or dinner, so I was always late for the family gathering. But this reading behavior would help me significantly in my further studies.

Losing My Number-One Ranking

Because of My Desire to See Phnom Penh

When I was studying in elementary school, I used to walk from home in the morning and afternoon; each time, one kilometer to go to school and vice versa. But when I attended junior high school, which was named "Pearang Junior High School," I could no longer walk, as the distance from home to school was three times longer than that to the previous school. Therefore, my parents bought me a bicycle. In high school, our way of life changed. First, we were no longer called "schoolboys" but

"students." We became big boys. Second, we did not have one permanent teacher, but many "professors" who taught us specific subjects, one professor for each subject. Third, our uniform changed too. Instead of wearing a white shirt and blue shorts, the students wore a white shirt and khaki pants. The last change was the lessons we had to learn. Except for Khmer literature, which was still taught in Khmer, other subjects were taught in French. My first year at Pearang High School was good. I received high ratings in history, science, mathematics, and composition in both Khmer and French. I was supposed to be the number one student in my class, but unfortunately, I finished the year in third place. This result was because I missed one of the subjects' control examinations in the first semester.

At that time, Phnom Penh, with its busy streets and avenues, all sorts of cars in circulation, many shopping places, beautiful gardens, and well-designed public and private buildings, was so attractive to me. Many times a year, I tried to make a trip to the city. Each time my elder brothers came to visit us, I always asked them to bring me along. And I always failed to get my parents'

approval. For me, visiting Phnom Penh was equal to receiving a reward. Normally, we went to the capital every year, but only on special occasions such as the Water Festival, Independence Day, and Congress Days (twice a year, the "Popular Community" organized a three-day congress so that ordinary people could talk to the ministers about any issue). One day, my brother, Sinoeun, came home for a weekend and proposed to my parents that I go with him to Phnom Penh. The idea was so exciting to me that I invented some good reasons to convince my parents to allow me to go with my brother. I did not tell them that I was having an examination. If they had been aware of my timing, they would have prevented me from taking pleasure in my unconscious and unnecessary desire. The student's performance was rated from 0 to 20 points. So, for one of the examinations in the first semester, I got an awful zero.

Throughout the year, the school council may reward the best students with prizes and honour awards. The awards consisted of certificates, prize certificates, and honour certificates. The prize certificate was delivered to the highest-rated student. But the best

among the best would receive an honour certificate. One day, the school management was organising an awards distribution ceremony. With a rating of zero in one subject of an examination, I had no hope of receiving any awards, and I did not pay much attention to the ceremony. I came to school late that day. When I arrived, a hundred students were crowding in front of the Director´s office. The director was calling the winners of the awards one by one. Those whose names were called were jumping with joy. Once they had received the certificates from the director´s hand, some of them just disappeared; some stayed, probably awaiting additional rewards.

I felt very sad and frustrated at the idea of losing the award just because of a stupid desire to go around the city. I was moving slowly to get closer to the place. Finally, the crowd seemed smaller. The director was now announcing the next winners of the honour award. Suddenly and unexpectedly, I heard, "Ieng Mouly" and then applause. My name was coming up first to receive the award. On the spot, I did not believe it. I was not so sure of

winning the prize, but when all eyes had turned on me, I became certain of my lucky moment.

I was so astonished to see this surprising and happy event happen. I was so proud to receive the honour certificate from the director, surrounded by many of my professors and friends. At that occasion, almost all students were cheerful.

Goodbye, Snay Pol.

Since my two brothers were sent to further their studies in Phnom Penh, sending children to study in the capital has become our family′s tradition. It was now my turn. My eldest brother was in charge of finding an appropriate high school in the capital. He was always taking care of our school problems. He had helped my second brother, Sinoeun, to be enrolled in one of the best high schools in the capital, Lycée Preah Yukanthor. For me, he found a place in his high school named "Sangkum Reastr Niyum High School," the "Popular Community High School." Finally, I moved to

Phnom Penh in 1964 after one year of studies in the junior high school.

I left my native village at the age of 14, with only a simple idea of furthering my studies, as I never thought that one day our family would have to move out, too. While living in Phnom Penh, I kept visiting Snay Pol often until 1970, when the war between Lon Nol and Sihanouk-Khmer Rouge took place. Afterwards, I had to wait 22 years to return to my birthplace. What I witnessed in the village during my childhood always remained in my mind. During these 22 years, like other villages in Cambodia, my village had suffered from wars, revolutions, separation, massacres, invasions by foreign troops, collectivism, totalitarianism, and political uncertainty. What was happening to my village could apply to many other villages as well because of the similarity in cultural, socio-economic, and political environments throughout the country. I always think of my native village as a source of inspiration for life, for freedom, for our traditional values, for human dignity, and for progress.