

'I Want to Have a Life'

Diana Giese introduces the latest Oral History recordings of the Khmer Community in Australia

Ramy Var and her younger sister arrived in Australia in 1983. They had nothing. But these Cambodian refugee orphans brought with them an invaluable legacy from their father, a history professor, killed by the Khmer Rouge. Says Ramy: 'He taught me that education was the only asset that could not be burnt or stolen.'

Ramy now works as coordinator for the Newly Arrived Refugees Program at Liverpool in western Sydney. She recruits, trains and supports bilingual educators, and plans, implements and evaluates their programs. Whether they come from Bosnia or South America, she finds many refugees have been 'emotionally, physically and psychologically affected' in ways similar to Khmers: 'loss of country, immediate family, escape, leaving people behind ... Australians think, "Why don't they go and learn English? Why don't they get a job?" They don't realise a lot of bad memories, a lot of flashbacks, a lot of things obstruct them, interfere with their minds.'

When she first arrived in Sydney, Ramy worked in factory jobs to support her sister and pay the rent. Australian friends encouraged her to move on. 'If you don't step out of the factory ... you'll remain there for the rest of your life,' they told her.



Ramy Var and her daughters, Vanessa and Malinda, Cambodian New Year 1997
Photograph courtesy of Ramy Var

She is one of six achievers from Khmer Community in Australia who were interviewed recently for the National Library's Oral History Collection. Those recorded were nominated by others who knew how they had built successful lives, while contributing to the wider community.

Nairand Kay is the current President of the Khmer Community in New South Wales. Eighteen days after arriving here, via a Thai transit camp and two years in a Cambodian prison, she had a job. Now working at Centrelink, she advises others from different backgrounds how to emulate her example. And she continues to educate herself: 'I like to learn all the time,' she says. 'It's not hard when you wish to learn.'

Since arriving in 1983, Soour Hai Gov has attended school, studied for a science degree, worked at several jobs, married and had a child, and started his own business. He is now Chairperson of the Cambodian-Australian Welfare Council of New South Wales. He was first offered the chance to attend school at the age of

Annual General Meeting of the Cambodian-Australian Welfare Council of New South Wales, 1999 (right to left) Por-Heang Ya, Soor Hai Gov and Nola Randall-Teung
Photograph courtesy of Soor Hai Gov

13, while living in a Thai camp. He says: 'I was learning very fast because I was so keen ... I was like a sponge.'

Sorathy Pouk Michell, Head Teacher of the Khmer Language Sunday School, has been involved in the introduction of Khmer language programs in both primary and secondary schools, and for public exams. 'I believe the early courses I did with AMES (Adult Migrant Education Service), and the six months of work experience funded by the Commonwealth Employment Service got me where I am now,' she says. She sees the scaling down of such opportunities as regrettable: 'Newly arrived migrants really suffer. Unemployment will only increase.'

Por-Heang Ya was studying to be a doctor in Cambodia. In Australia, he has completed an Arts degree, worked for the Department of Community Services, and served as President of the Khmer Community. He is a strong advocate for a diverse society: 'Multiculturalism is the way to allow people to invest in each other. That way, they can contribute to a strong country,' he says.

This sense of both serving their own group, and extending their work to those beyond the immediate community echoes through the interviews. At Burnside Cabramatta Centre, Chong-Hean Ang manages multicultural, multidisciplinary programs for family support, child protection and youth work, including an adolescent legal service. The programs encompass Spanish, Vietnamese, Lao, Bengali and Hindi-speaking communities, as well as Khmers. 'We need to educate and empower people to take charge of their own lives,' he says. The aim is to encourage people to be both resilient and productive. Hean himself is completing a Master of Business Administration at the same time as his daughter is studying for her degree. As Nairand Kay puts it, 'You don't just cry at home. You've got to go where the service is available.'

Burnside is also organising training in management skills and leadership. Hean finds that cultural attitudes such as male domination, when challenged in this country, can create all kinds of problems. With loss of status and self-esteem due to unemployment, and the assertiveness of a generation of children educated here, 'men feel threatened,' he says. The Men and Family Relationships program invites men to think about power dynamics within families, and the superior male strength that can lead to domestic violence. 'Men often don't realise how powerful they are within the family,' says Hean. 'Their attitude to their wives often was "You

stay home and feed the children. I go out there, work my guts out. I come home; you cook for me.'" But Khmer women in Australia don't want to be 'stuck at home ... now we've got our female members saying, "Look, I want to go out there. I want to have a life."

Many refugees almost missed out on any life at all. Under the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979, most Cambodians suffered displacement, forced labour and starvation. Families were torn apart, childhood and youth destroyed, and homes and land stolen. The 1979 invasion by Vietnamese forces toppled Pol Pot and set up a new regime.

But the refugee exodus had already started. The Communist victories in 1975 in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, formerly French Indochina, set more than two million people on the move. A quarter of these had fled Cambodia. Australia took five Cambodian refugees in 1975, and 241 in 1976. By 1978, a larger resettlement program meant that 388 people came here, and numbers swelled in 1982–83 to over 4000 new arrivals. Since the mid-1980s, more people have arrived via the Thai transit camps, and the focus has been on family reunion. The 1991 Census reported 17 555 Cambodian-born people in Australia.

Khmer Community interviews at the National Library will supplement those recorded earlier, and related sound material such as National Press Club addresses on human rights and politics. In 1985–86, as part of the Cultural Context of Unemployment

project, a number of Cambodian refugees were interviewed in their own language. They spoke of their lives before Pol Pot, the treatment meted out to their families by the Khmer Rouge, escape to the transit camps and the challenges of resettling in Australia—finding homes, learning English and looking for work.

The new interviews tell what has happened since. These stories are full of the drive, determination and ambition necessary for success in a new society. Over and over again, the interviewees emphasise the advantages of becoming competent in English. Ramy Var describes the language as a:

Passport ... to get a job, to feel you belong, to be a success in life, to go where you want to go. Without the language, you feel like you're limited, within only your boundaries, like around your house. You will be scared to travel, to catch a bus, catch a train somewhere, because you're scared of getting lost, of what's going to happen to you.

As they were contending with the new culture, Khmer Australians also struggled to avoid seeing the world with 'wounded eyes'. Everyone spoke of recurring nightmares of cruelty and hardship. Feelings of emptiness and loneliness can strike at unexpected times, they say. But memories of parents and siblings are cherished; their presence is often felt. This helps the survivors take big decisions and move forward.

Soour Hai Gov talks of the anger that initially motivated him in this

Por Heang Ya,
President, Khmer
Community 1994–98
at Angkor Wat
Photograph courtesy
of Por Heang Ya





Buddhist Temple, Khmer Community,
Bonnyrigg, New South Wales
Photograph courtesy of Por Heang Ya

Nairand Kay points to how important extended family, real or surrogate, can be in Australia to pass on cultural lessons concerning respect for age and experience. Says Soour Hai Gov of his arrival as an orphan:

I don't have a brother. I long for a brother. I long for a sister. I long for a family... All that I loved was taken away from me ... I'm a lost child.

Now, in his work with young people, he draws on that bleak background: 'Finding a lot of people care for them will help save their life.'

So too will having a sense of where they came from, they say. During their education in Cambodia, most people were taught that theirs was 'the highest civilisation on earth', with the magnificent Angkor Wat complex as its national symbol. But, as Chong-Hean Ang says, 'a culture evolves. Culture is not static. What can define Khmer culture?'

In fact, it is intermixing with others in Australia. Last year, the Khmer Community joined with Chinese and Vietnamese Australians to celebrate the Moon Festival. Traditional rivalries were ignored. Says Nairand Kay: 'Instead of saying, "I cannot be friends with the Vietnamese" I said, "That's got to be changed. This is Australia."' She supports the Community's proud displays of Khmer culture and traditions, dancing and costume, specifically involving younger people.

country. He wanted to become a nuclear physicist, 'so I could build an atomic bomb and blow the whole world up and just be me by myself. The kindness of mentors, including an Australian family, turned him from hate to caring. Now he has started to use his energy positively. 'I'm now learning to build a different atomic bomb ... I want to initiate a chain reaction, so I can help people realise their potential energy,' he says.

In his youth work, he is encouraging people to overcome violent responses to racist taunts. He is also studying Buddhist texts, since he believes:

Buddhism encourages openness, investigation. It really helps people to cope with stress, with traumatising experience—and it makes you a better person.

On the tapes, people also talk about the details of their Australian lives—their partners and children, their homes and jobs; the strengths of reworked cultural traditions; their hopes and dreams. The accounts emphasise how much survival depended not only on their own courage and fortitude, but also on the compassion and generosity of a succession of others. As Ramy Var explains:

I had a lot of good friends, a lot of helping hands ... one person finished their responsibility, then handed over to someone else.

So in Cambodia, she and her sister were protected by a family in a remote mountain village, by an old woman who accompanied them back to Phnom Penh, by a cousin who smuggled them to a refugee camp, and by an older male sponsor who acted like a father, to bring them to Australia. Sorathy Pouk Michell says of friends and colleagues: 'everyone here became our family ... that's how you survive in a new country'. 'Aunties' her mother's age began to negotiate a suitable marriage, and her own group became 'brothers and sisters'.

You see them in my engagement photo. There's a whole bunch of them there, protecting me. Sometimes Michael had to say, 'Hang on! She's my fiancée.'

Dany Touch (second from left), photographed with her ministerial award for success in learning Khmer language. Nairand Kay, President, Khmer Community (back row, second from left), and Sorathy Pouk Michell, Head Teacher of the Khmer Language Sunday School (far right)
Photograph courtesy of Sorathy Pouk Michell



She also feels they can learn from older-established communities, such as Chinese Australians.

Chong-Hean Ang characterises the Khmer refugee experience as 'life lost, life found'. What they have found in this country includes shelter from war and chaos, renewed life chances and lack of restrictions. When she moved into a flat with her sponsor on arrival in Australia, 20-year-old Ramy Var asked what time the curfew began. Her whole life to that point had been governed by 'curfew, curfew, curfew'. Laughing, her sponsor replied:

Oh, my dear, you can travel to anywhere—any time, in the middle of the night, in the morning. You can go anywhere you like. No-one's going to follow you. No-one's going to stop you.

She thought: 'Oh my goodness—freedom at last!'

Revisiting Cambodia has been, for her and others, a necessary part of reaching a true sense of who they are and where they have come from:

The jigsaw that was scattered and shattered for so many years [became] connected. I felt at peace, recovered ... Now I have done what I wanted to do—to pay respects, to say good-bye.

When asked who she would have listen to the four hours of eloquent taped testimony that poured out of her, she replied:

The bureaucrats. The government. The Prime Minister and politicians who make decisions about refugees' lives. The people who make decisions on providing services to refugee communities. And the public out there, who have little understanding about refugees—maybe it's time for you to learn about us and for us to

share with you ... By living in this country, inevitably learning about Australian lives, ways of culture, our children will be Australian, working, contributing all their life to Australia.

DIANA GIESE is an oral historian and writer who also organises museum public programs

New Lives, in collaboration with the National Library as part of the *Reclaiming the Past* series, will be held at the Museum of Sydney on Saturday 27 May at 2 pm. It will showcase the tapes recorded and the community archive which will be set up to house them and other documentary material. Nairand Kay will introduce the other interviewees.

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

DIRECTIONS

FOR 2000–2002

The National Library has issued its statement of *Directions* for the next two to three years. The *Directions* statement sets out the Library's particular goal for 2000–2002 and defines our objectives and key priorities for this period.

The Library's overall objective remains the access by Australians to a comprehensive collection of Australian library materials, and to national and international information resources. While continuing to ensure that we collect our cultural heritage materials and the works of our contemporaries, we will advance our development work to utilise the Internet for widespread delivery of information and services.

The *Directions* statement can be accessed through the Library's web site: www.nla.gov.au. To obtain a copy of the *Directions* statement contact Gloria Kenneth on (02) 6262 1390.



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