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Ty, O Oral History Interview: Class Projects

Elsa Wachter

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Interview With A Cambodian Immigrant
Professor Green
November 31, 1998
Interviewee: O Ty
Interviewer: Elsa Wachter

EW: For the record please state your full name
OT: O Ty
EW: Were you born in Cambodia?
OT: Yes
EW: And how long did you live there?
OT: I lived there until I was two years old and then I moved to Thailand
EW: And how long did you live in Thailand?
OT: About until I was 12 years old. So that was about 10 years.
EW: Why did you move from Cambodia to Thailand?
OT: Cause that was during the war, so my parents wanted to get away from the war.
EW: Why did you move to Thailand and move to the United State?
OT: We went to Thailand and we lived with our grandma for a while and then they sent us to a refugee camp called Situ and we stayed there for a while, about a year or two.
EW: How did you get from Cambodia to Thailand?
OT: walked
EW: Do you remember that?
OT: Not really much cause I was two years old, I couldn't remember that.
EW: Got carried and stuff?
OT: Yes.
EW: Did you go to school in Thailand?
OT: Yes.
EW: What was school like?
OT: It was very easy for me. I skipped one grade though. I went from first grade to third grade and I went up to fifth grade after.
EW: If you could compare United States schools to the schools in Thailand, what's the main difference?
OT: In Thailand they don't give you much work for at home, just work down at school. Over there, they punish you, by like torturing and whipping.
EW: It's more academic here?
OT: Yes, more academic.
EW: More homework and stuff
OT: Yes
EW: And did your family practice any religion in Cambodia and Thailand?
OT: Yes we were Buddhism but now we are Christian, CRC.
EW: How did you change when you came here?
OT: When we came here we had our uncle for our sponsor and he's a minister so he turned us around.
EW: Do you remember being Buddhist?
OT: Yes
EW: Was it a lot different?
OT: Yes it was.
Why did you leave Thailand to come here?
The first time that my dad mailed a letter to my uncle because life over there was harder than here and he said he was going to sponsor us so, it takes a while.

And you came to Holland specifically because your uncle's here?
Yes
Not because it's some incredibly interesting city or anything?
No
So you chose the US because your uncle is here, but you don't have any other relatives anywhere else?
No, just my family.
You were 12 when you left, and how did you get here? By plane?
Yep, we flew.
Who all came?
My parents, my brother, and my two sisters.
How old are your brother and sisters?
They're all younger than me. My brother is 17 right now and my little sister is 14 and my youngest sister is 8.
So do they remember the trip, your youngest sisters?
The youngest one, I'm not sure, she was 3 at the time.
Right when you go to the US, what were your first impressions?
I don't know. It was amazing because there were so many lights out there. I just kept on looking out because over there they don't have many lights. It's all like dark. And when you come here it's just surprising.
What was your first reaction? Did you just like look all over?
I kept on looking. When I was in the car my uncle was driving to his house. He picked us up at the airport.
In Grand Rapids.
Yeah. In Grand Rapids. While I was in the car I was looking all around and how my mind was going because I was in a car and I had never been in a car before.
Oh cool. What was your first impression of Holland specifically?
Holland.....
You didn't really know anything else?
It was quiet the first time, in my uncle's house.
Where did you first live when you arrived in Holland?
I think it's on 24th.
Did you live with your uncle? or did you have your own house?
We lived with my uncle.
Did your parents work when they got here?
Not for a while.
Did they work in Cambodia and then Thailand?
My dad did, yes.
What did he do?
He was some kind of working, I'm not sure...
Like physical labor?
OT: Not really, just like doing foreign trade stuff like business in Cambodia.

EW: When they got here, what jobs did they eventually get?
OT: Factory work at Hayworth.

EW: Was that a big change from the work he had before?
OT: I think so yes.

EW: Did your mom get a job?
OT: Yes

EW: Did you know any English when you came?
OT: A little bit. Because in Thailand they taught us a little bit of English.

EW: And was it totally different? Was is easy to pick up the language or was it difficult?
OT: It was a little difficult for a while. We just learned simple things such as boy, girl, woman.

EW: And how long did it take you to master the language just so you could speak it?
OT: When I was here, it took me about a year or so.

EW: Did people discriminate against you? Did the people of Holland accept you? Did you sense hostility from anyone?
OT: The first time I came here, I didn't think about racism or anything. But once I know about it, I just recognize it when people show it to me.

EW: Did you have any friends at school that were Cambodian also?
OT: Yes

EW: Were there a lot?
OT: Not really a lot, just a couple.

EW: Do you still speak the Cambodian language?
OT: To my friends right now?

EW: To your friends or your family do you speak it at all?
OT: No.

EW: Did you forget all of it?
OT: Not yet. I speak Cambodian to my family, that's it.

EW: But you don't speak it to your friends at all?
OT: Only sometimes when it comes up, just little things.

EW: When you don't want anyone else to know?
OT: Yeah, yes.

EW: What specific events in your early years in Holland are most memorable to you, that would stand out in your mind?
OT: I would think it's ....

EW: Anything that you remember that totally shocked you when you were young?
OT: Yeah the first time when I go to school.

EW: Why?
OT: It was scary because I didn't know anybody and I didn't know how to speak English so I didn't know how to talk to, to communicate to people.

EW: What happened? How did your teachers react? How did you react?
OT: I just sat there quiet the whole time and in the hallways it was like walking strange, people all around me.

EW: What grade did you come? 6th?
OT: Yes. 6th grade.

EW: So you started Middle School, that must have been
interesting.
EW: Did you eventually move into your own house?
OT: Yes, we separated.
EW: Did you make neighborhood friends?
OT: Yes
EW: Did that help you learn English?
OT: Yes it helped me learn English a lot. A lot mostly from watching TV and movies.
EW: TV, see TV is good for something.
EW: What was the most difficult adjustment for you?
OT: I'm just getting through it, I don't know how it was difficult.
EW: Do you still have family in Cambodia?
OT: Yes
EW: Do you ever talk to them, correspond with them?
OT: They mail letters sometimes. They're poor over there so my parents are working hard sending money back and forth.
EW: Who were your friends when you first came to America?
OT: First, well I came in the summer, and that was during June. And my uncle has a son who has a friend who comes over and plays with him. And he's in my grade too.
EW: Did you know any other immigrants when you came over? Did anyone come over at the same time?
OT: Nope, later on in the year someone came, in January.
EW: Have any other members of your family come over since you have?
OT: Nope
EW: Are they planning on coming over? Are you planning on sponsoring them?
OT: Yes we're planning on doing that.
EW: Will you ever visit them if they stay in Cambodia?
OT: Maybe if we get the Green card we can go over.
EW: Do you ever call them on the telephone?
OT: They call us. My parents they only accept certain calls, just a few.
EW: Do they talk about how you are lucky because you got out?
OT: Well my parents doesn't want to talk a lot because when they call they don't accept some calls because they beg a lot, they beg too much. It's too much for us.
EW: Did you notice a difference between how your parents raised you in the two countries?
OT: Sure. It's different. In Cambodia, it's more hardship and they treat me harder. And here it's more .. lenient?
OT: They're more toward comforting me and treating me well.
EW: And is that in general do most parents make their children work harder in Cambodia?
OT: Yes.
EW: So if school isn't hard, how do they make it hard? Do they have to work other than school?
OT: It wasn't hard for me because I know the language and it was just easy for me. What was hard is that the students have to do the work. If they don't do the work then they get punished. That's the only thing. They get whipped and come
home, bring all the scars to their parents.

EW: Did you ever come in conflict, did the war ever affect you personally?

OT: In the camps yes. They had some wars there and I remember running around in the cities and in the towns.

EW: What were the camps like?

OT: The camps were about two-three hundred people.

EW: And that was in Thailand right?

OT: Yes that was in Thailand.

EW: Did you have to get on a list to be sponsored? How did you talk to your uncle so he could sponsor you?

OT: I don't know during that time but my dad did. I don't know, some how they mailed a letter and sponsored.

EW: Do you have a very closely-knit family? Here and back in Cambodia?

OT: Yeah here and in Cambodia too.

EW: How do you think your lives would have been different if you had grown up in Asia?

OT: In Asia, I could have been dead or hungry. I don't think the school over there is much of a success.

EW: Do you think you would have been thinking about going to college like you are now?

OT: No.

EW: What do you think, if you were still alive, you would have ended up doing as a job?

OT: I would have been a farmer. Mostly over there it's just farming.

EW: In what way has your life been most changed by your decision to come to America?

OT: Over here I have more hopes and that's about it.

EW: Have you been happy here?

OT: Yes. Sometimes yeah, but sometimes I miss my country and I want to go back.

EW: Do you think you'll ever raise kids there, or move back there? Or just visit?

OT: Just visit.

EW: Have you been back there at all?

OT: Nope

EW: Does your family keep up traditions and cultures? Do you still eat the food?

OT: Everyday.

EW: What are some of the big cultural things that are different from America? The things your family does that not a lot of other families do?

OT: We do?

EW: What's a big tradition or a culture difference?

OT: Let's see... I don't know. I can't think of one. I don't think we have specific ones. We just eat together and she always cooks Cambodian food. But when I go out I eat American food.

EW: What's your favorite?

OT: I like them both.

EW: Well what's your favorite Cambodian meal?

OT: I would think it's noodles with water and meat and
vegetables.

EW: Did you have any part in making the decision to come here?
You were pretty young.

CT: I was pretty young. I just followed my parents.

EW: If they had the chance to make that decision to come here
again, do you think still choose to come here?

CT: Yes.

EW: And are your parents happy?

CT: Yes.

EW: Do you think that they'd ever consider moving back there?

CT: Yeah. They're talking about moving back there one time.
When I grow up, I'd get my own career and I can treat them,
and feed them and send them money. Just like what we're
doing right now is my parents treating my grandma in
Thailand.

EW: So she still lives in Thailand?

CT: Yes

EW: Do you know in what part of Cambodia did you live?

CT: Do you want the name of the province?

EW: Sure, and the general area.

CT: Batumbong that's the name of the province

EW: Is that in the North or the South?

CT: I'm not sure, it's by Penonpeng.

EW: Did you live in the city or in the country?

CT: More towards the country.

EW: Do you have any thrilling stories to tell me about moving
here or anything that affected you at all?

CT: When I moved here I left a friend without saying goodbye and
I miss that so much. I just want to go back and find him.
He meant so much to me. Everyday I was poor and everyday he
gave me money for food. I remember his first name but I
just want to go back and find him.

EW: Was this in Thailand or Cambodia?

CT: This was in Thailand, in the camps.

EW: Why didn't you get to say goodbye to him?

CT: I didn't have a chance. Right in the morning I just left.
And I was just crying in the bus when I left and I was
saying goodbye to my country.

EW: Where did you fly out of?

CT: I don't know.. all I remember is the airport in Thailand.

EW: So it was in Thailand.

CT: It was in Thailand.
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EW: Why did you move to Thailand and move to the United State?
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To my friends right now?

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Did you forget all of it?

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But you don't speak it to your friends at all?

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When you don't want anyone else to know?

Yeah, yes.

What specific events in your early years in Holland are most memorable to you, that would stand out in your mind?

I would think it's ....

Anything that you remember that totally shocked you when you were young?

Yeah the first time when I go to school.

Why?

It was scary because I didn't know anybody and I didn't know how to speak English so I didn't know how to talk to, to communicate to people.

What happened? How did your teachers react? How did you react?

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What grade did you come? 6th?

Yes. 6th grade.

So you started Middle School, that must have been
interesting.

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OT: Yeah here and in Cambodia too.
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EW: What do you think, if you were still alive, you would have ended up doing as a job?
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EW: Have you been happy here?
OT: Yes. Sometimes yeah, but sometimes I miss my country and I want to go back.
EW: Do you think you'll ever raise kids there, or move back there? Or just visit?
OT: Just visit.
EW: Have you been back there at all?
OT: No.
EW: Does your family keep up traditions and cultures? Do you still eat the food?
OT: Everyday.
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OT: I was pretty young. I just followed my parents.
EW: If they had the chance to make that decision to come here again, do you think you'd choose to come here?
OT: Yes.
EW: And are your parents happy?
OT: Yes.
EW: Do you think that they'd ever consider moving back there?
OT: Yeah. They're talking about moving back there one time. When I grow up, I'd get my own career and I can treat them, and feed them and send them money. Just like what we're doing right now is my parents treating my grandma in Thailand.
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