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Tep, Khon Oral History Interview (Cambodian): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

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Interview with
Khon Tep
Cambodian Resident

Conducted June 28, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

1994 Summer Oral History Project
The Asian-American Community in Holland, Michigan

DR: My name is Donna Rottier. The date is June 28, 1994, and I am interviewing Khon Tep in her home in Holland, Michigan. If you could please repeat your full name for the record.

KT: My name is Khon Tep.

DR: Your current address?

KT: My address is 760 W. 32nd, Holland, Michigan.

DR: And your date and place of birth?

KT: I was born on [date removed], 1944.

DR: Where were you born?

KT: In Cambodia.

DR: When did you first move to Holland?

KT: I moved to Holland in 1989.

DR: Could you begin by describing a little bit about your life in Cambodia and what it was like there?

KT: When I was in Cambodia before the Communists took over, I worked at the Post Office. I had four children. My husband is a commander of the military police in Cambodia. I worked for the police. When the Communists took over in 1975, the night of April 17th, I told him to escape from Cambodia because otherwise he'd get killed by the Communists. That's why I'm separate from my husband. I never see him ever again.

DR: Do you know where he is?

KT: I don't know. I look for him everywhere, every country. I never heard from him. He escaped by helicopter, but I never heard from

him again. One of his friends told me maybe the helicopter crashed somewhere, so that's why. His friend's still alive. He lives in Virginia. He told me definitely he died. I'm not sure because I never heard about it, except his friend told me.

DR: When did you and the rest of your family leave Cambodia?

KT: The Communist Party, the soldiers of the Communists come to my house and tell me you better get out from the house for three days otherwise the Americans bomb the city, the capitol. I live in Phnom Penh city, the capitol of Cambodia. He told me that you better leave the house for three days otherwise Americans bomb the city. We totally believed them. I take with me just a couple clothes and a small bag of rice and food, a pot to cook outside of the house because we heard that we just get out three days. Then after three days they don't let us to come back home. They tell us to go to the countryside and work in the fields. I never saw my house again.

Then I lived with the Communists for more than two years. They treat us like a prisoner. We work in the fields since the early morning until evening. Then we don't have anything, we don't have money to spend, because they don't have money either. We just work for them and have food to eat. When we got sick, we don't have medicine at all. I lived there for more than two years and then the war again between Vietnam and Cambodia and Pol Pot the leader, his name is Pol Pot.

When they have the war, then I decided to escape to Vietnam. I didn't know. I heard Vietnam Communist, too, but I cannot live in Cambodia. Otherwise I know my own children, I get killed because my husband is a soldier. All the widows of the soldiers get killed. Plus, I worked for the government, too, the Post Office, that's a government job. Anybody that works for the government, they arrest and put in the prison and kill later. So that's why I decided to escape to Vietnam. Then when they had the war, the Pol Pot soldiers tried to run away from the [], the place that I lived. They tell you to move, too, to move towards them, to move with them, too, to go to another place to live. But I cannot escape with them. I know for sure if I escape with them, then I'm pretty sure I'll die, and my children, too.

Then I decided to escape to South Vietnam, but I cannot get in right away; I have to live on the border of South Vietnam for a while. We had to find the food by ourselves, like go to the rice fields, because nobody dared, no soldier anymore, because they are afraid the Vietnam soldiers have more soldiers than Pol Pot's. That's why the Pol Pot run away. That's why I lived there, trying to survive myself, find food to survive, from the fields.

About a month then they have the new government, they reform a little bit. Then the Vietnam let us, because those people--I think maybe they make friends with South Vietnam--so they let us go to South Vietnam. I stayed there one year. Then a lot of

countries go to visit the camp, we were in the camp. They let us move into camp. A lot of countries would visit the camp and give aid, like food, and clothes, too, but a lot of people escaped, not just my family. I lived there one year until I heard that the new government, Heng Samrin is the new government. I heard that Heng Samrin win the war, and they kicked out the Khmer. Then we decided to go back there to Cambodia.

When I go to Cambodia, I go back to work for the, to do something to survive. I buy or sell something because we don't have any more jobs like the job that I had before. So I don't have any more. I need to start selling and buy something, trade, make a little money to survive with my four daughters. I lived there maybe five or six months. Then I realized that it's still Communist.

Then I this time escaped to Thailand, because Thailand is a free country. So I escaped to the border of Thailand. Then I lived there for maybe three months on the border of Thailand. They had the camp. I lived there and I worked for C.A.R.E. I volunteered for C.A.R.E., and I worked for C.A.R.E. After three months the Vietnamese bombed the camp. It was really really difficult. A lot of people died. The Thai bombed from one side and the Vietnam from Cambodia, and we are in the camp. A lot of people are dying. I'm very lucky, I'm still alive with my four daughters.

Then I still volunteer work for C.A.R.E. after they fight. Then I'm really sick, really sick. We don't have water to drink. We have dirty water, and diarrhea. I'm really sick. Then the Red Cross take me to the camp in Thailand, called [] Camp to work for the hospital over there. I stayed there; I never come back to the border of Cambodia. When I get better, then I volunteer work for the orphan children and take care of the children, a lot of children orphaned. I take care of 169 children. Not just me, a lot of, they call mother and father.

I stayed there and I applied for the first country. We have the right to apply for the first country. I applied to the United States, applied to Canada, Australia, France, but definitely United States accept me to go to the first country. I didn't even know, that when I got here, a lot of people. First of Nazareth Church sponsored me. I come with my four daughters. When I got off of the airplane, I saw a lot of people welcome me, and I cried! It's more than I dream.

DR: What were some of your first experiences after you got here?

KT: After I got here, then my sponsor helped me, the church, gave me clothes, gave me a place to stay. Then send my four children go to school. Then I go to ESL school. After a year, I decide to go to college. I went to Jordan College. After three years I graduate with a certificate in computer application. Before I graduate, one of my friends, Socheth Na, he works here, he lived

in Grand Rapids with me, too. But he works for Graafschap Church for I guess part time. But he drove back and forth to Holland. He told me that he heard that Holland Public Schools needs a bilingual assistant, Cambodian bilingual assistant. So I said, "Oh, I'm interested in that." He told me that if I'm interested I should go to see Monika Giddy. I call Monika Giddy, Socheth gave me the phone number, and then I called and talked to Monika and she asked me, "Do you ever go to Holland?" I said, "Yes, but I just go to the beach." I go to the State Park a lot, but I never go into town, because I got lost easily.

DR: At that time you were living in Grand Rapids?

KT: In Grand Rapids, yes. Then Monika told me about go to Meijer at 16th Street and when you see Meijer you go past Meijer, past the cemetery, then you see the Community Ed. When I go to Holland she told me to come to Holland and go to Meijer and then you call me, then I go get you. When I see Meijer, I try to go by myself on 16th Street. There is the Community Ed. and so I go there and I go to see Monika. Oh, she was very happy that I can get by myself! She introduced me and she really like it. She really liked me. She said, "You should go for a job interview. Then I go to interview again. Then I get the job!"

DR: Do you still work there now?

KT: Yes, I still work.

DR: How many years have you been working there?

KT: I get the job on 1988 until now. It has been six years, 1988 to 1994.

DR: What kinds of things do you do there?

KT: I help the Cambodian children, especially the Cambodian children that just came here. They don't speak English at all. I have to start teach the alphabet with them and tell them to learn how to say the words, about the words that they learn, about the words. They learn that they say the date every day, then they know how to say today is Monday, yesterday, Sunday, every day, then they learn. They are smart children.

DR: How many kids have you helped?

KT: I went to two schools, sometimes three schools, not just one school because the Cambodians have right now they are a lot in Van Raalte School, and Longfellow School, just one at Longfellow School. But I have the Spanish children in math, too. At Longfellow School I have the Spanish kids with math and the Cambodians with reading English. At Van Raalte School there are more Cambodian kids, maybe seven children or whatever. Some of them are pretty good, so I didn't go to see them.

DR: Do you have a sense of how many Cambodian families live in Holland?

KT: I heard that eighty families, this a long time, but now I don't know how much. I heard a lot are coming from everywhere because here there are a lot of job openings so people start coming and

coming. I heard some come from California, some from Chicago, from everywhere because they have really less work there. They tell some friend they know, there are jobs, so they come here to make a living.

DR: Did you know anybody before you moved here?

KT: No, I didn't know anybody. I moved here because of Sochet Na helped me. Then I get a job here. Satisfied, I moved. Because when I got a job, I drive back and forth for a year. Especially when you get tired it's very difficult, so I decide to move to Holland.

DR: Do you still have family who live in Cambodia?

KT: Yes. I have one brother still living in Cambodia. I have a lot, but they die when they Communists took over. They get killed when the Communists took over. But now, just one brother, he live in Cambodia, in the capitol of Cambodia right now. I heard that my husband's younger brother, and his older brother, they killed right away. When the Communists took over, they killed them right away. A lot men died when the Communists took over, not many survived. I'm lucky, I escaped to Vietnam, otherwise I get killed, too. But I know I could not stay with them, so I decide to escape before they arrested me.

DR: That's an incredible story. What have your daughters done since you've lived in the United States?

KT: My daughters? They went to Kentwood School. They graduate, they all they graduate from Kentwood School. My older daughter, she went to Olivet College. Now she come back home and she works at [] now. My second daughter, she get married and she moved to Connecticut. She now one girl. My third daughter, she get married, too. She has one boy, his name is Austin. My younger one, she lives with me now. She finished school, too. Now she is [].

DR: Are you involved, other than working for the Holland Public Schools, are you involved in any other community organizations or activities?

KT: Yes. I have a lot of Cambodian dance. Like church, I have a Cambodian church. And Cambodian Community, like when they have Cambodian New Year. Then I help them about the dance.

DR: You actually teach Cambodian people this dance?

KT: My daughters, they used to be a dancer when they were in the camps. They learned how to dance, like classical dance, and folk dance. Then they teach the kids here. My daughter teach them, but I help them out to dress up, make costumes for them, and help each other to do dance.

DR: Now, the costumes that you make, are those original Cambodian costumes?

KT: Yes. The material I buy in the United States, but some materials I tell my friends to send to me. But the costume is Cambodian

style for the dance, especially the [] dance. The costume is different, totally different.

DR: What sorts of other holidays or traditions do you celebrate here?

KT: New Year, and, just New Year.

DR: How has the way that you celebrate the New Year changed since you've lived here?

KT: It changed a lot because we don't have enough material, like New Year, they supposed to play games, and we don't have material to play games. The dance, too, we don't have enough material to perform the dance like Cambodians, so we think and do, make enough to make it look like Cambodia, but not first-class Cambodian. But it's still really pretty!

DR: Did you say that there was a Cambodian association in Holland?

KT: Like Cambodians, they miss the New Year. So that's why they just collect money, and organize the Cambodians. I don't know. I heard that they apply for their association, but I don't know how far they do, so far.

DR: Do you know who's in charge of that?

KT: Yes, I know a lot of, but not just one, many people collect the money and rent the hall and rent the band. I help some with the dance and somebody helps something else.

DR: Could you explain the role of religion or a personal faith, if you have any, in your life?

KT: Right now there are some people believe in Buddha, Buddhism. Some people are Buddhists and some people are Christians. My parents used to be Buddhist, but when I came here, the church sponsored me. After I go to the church for a year with my sponsor, then I like it and I decide baptize. Now I go to the church.

DR: Do you still go to a church in Grand Rapids, or a church here?

KT: Now I go to the Cambodian church. But it's at the Graafschap church because they don't have their own church yet. It's small.

DR: How many people attend?

KT: Sometimes maybe thirty people, sometimes twenty-five, sometimes thirty-five, sometimes forty.

DR: Do you have much contact with Asians who were born in other countries who live here in Holland?

KT: Yes, when the school tells me to go make home visits, then I go and make a home visit, to the Vietnam, and Laos. I can speak Vietnam, but not really plainly, but I can understand and can communicate with them, because the school needs me to go to talk with the parents. But now when I came to the Laos, it's really difficult for me because I don't know how to speak Laos. Sometimes I speak English, they understand me!

DR: What do you do when the school has you visit a family?

KT: About like library books they forgot to send back with the kids, so I have to tell them. Sometimes the kid has to have shots and they forgot to take them. Sometimes they have problem in the

school. I have to tell them about the kids, especially conferences. Then I talk to the parents, translate for the parents. Sometimes the school needs help because the technique of the work is hard to understand sometimes. They understand English, but they still need to be explained about the school system.

DR: Have you noticed or experienced yourself any racial tension or prejudice or discrimination against you or other Asians?

KT: About me, I don't think I have any. But, yes, I've heard, too, the parents told me, it's really difficult for some families. They have hard times, difficulties. Some kids tell me that there is some racial towards them, too.

DR: From other kids in the school?

KT: Yes, yes.

DR: What do you think is the reason for that, and why do you think that people act that way?

KT: It's real hard. It's probably that . . . I don't know.

DR: What sort of changes have you seen in the years that you've lived in Holland, like as far as numbers of Asian people living here, or things that they do, or other sorts of changes?

KT: Yes, a lot of changes in Holland. I see more and more people here. Now it's a little bit crowded than before.

DR: What do you think that you as a Cambodian person have to offer the community of Holland?

KT: Like me, when the city of Holland asks me to dance, bring the kids to dance, I volunteer for Holland and I bring coconut dance for them. And they really like it. The people, I don't know, I don't know about it, I don't know much. Because I'm a single mother, and I'm too busy for my life!

DR: That's understandable! If you had to share or say one thing about yourself or your experience that you'd want people to read about or people to know about, what would that one thing be?

KT: About me, I like the community. I think the community has something and asks for help, I volunteer to help. This is about me, I like to help, to be involved, to make the city look good. Here is the city, like they have Tulip Time. I volunteer marching with the kids. So I'm really happy to do that.

DR: Do you think that you'll continue to live in Holland in the future?

KT: Yes, I think so.

DR: That's all of my questions. I appreciate you talking and telling me about yourself. If there is anything that you think I haven't asked or would like to add, feel free.

KT: Thank you.

DR: Thank you very much.

Note regarding interview with Khon Tep on June 28, 1994:

As was the procedure with all of the interviews conducted, a copy of this transcript was sent to Ms. Tep for editing. Partially because several important events in the summer of 1994 (namely the marriages of two of her daughters) made it a very busy one for her, she did not return an edited transcript immediately. I followed up several times by phone, once with a reminder letter, and finally this summer with another copy of the transcript and a final letter urging Ms. Tep to make any clarifications or edits she feels necessary for the overall clarity of the interview. It is my hope that Ms. Tep will return an edited transcript, but until that time, this is the version as transcribed to the best of my ability directly from the tape-recorded interview. Any information which I could not decipher is denoted by brackets.

dmr
08/23/95