



Oral History and Folklife Research, Inc.

An Interview with:
Makara Meng

Interview Conducted By:
Keith Ludden

South Portland, Maine
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Transcribed by Jesse Ahearn

Reviewed by Keith Ludden

KL: Okay, great, so let me start with a little bit of housekeeping. It is June 7, [2016], is that right? Is it the seventh or eighth?

MM: June eighth.

KL: June eighth. Okay, let me see. Yeah that's right, June eighth. And, we are in South Portland. And, we are talking to Makara Meng. Am I pronouncing that correctly?

MM: Yes.

KL: Okay, good. Do, you mind if I ask, what year you were born?

MM: (laughter)

KL: Oh, one thing I didn't tell you. If there is anything that makes you uncomfortable, tell me. Because, that is not what I want. I do not want to make anybody uncomfortable.

MM: (laughter)

KL: You are in control.

MM: Okay.

KL: My job is to get the best sound recording I can. And, have this conversation. So, if I go in to areas that make you uncomfortable, please, let me know.

MM: Okay.

KL: Okay?

MM: Alright.

KL: Do you mind if I ask, what year you were born?

MM: No, that's okay. I was born, December thirty-one, 1970.

KL: 1970

MM: Yeah, New Years Eve, in Cambodia. Yeah.

KL: And, where was that?

MM: Where is Cambodia?

KL: No, where in Cambodia?

MM: Oh, where in Cambodia. In Phnom Penh, which is the capital of Cambodia.

KL: Okay, great. So you were born in a fairly large city?

MM: Yes. But, then later my parents moved back to—My parents traveled from the city and then the village, because they owned both... They owned a property, a farm home in the village, the province. So, but then, they also came to the city, because my dad is a police officer. So, yeah. The weekday he is in the capitol, the weekend he is in the village. That was what I was told.

KL: So, your father is still in Cambodia?

MM: Right now?

KL: Mm-Hmm.

MM: No.

KL: Oh, okay. Can you describe your neighborhood? Do you remember much of your neighborhood? I understand you were fairly young when you left.

MM: Correct. Growing up. Cambodia has a very traditional, cultural village life. We're very friendly, very respectful, very spiritual. Everybody in the community, or in the block, knows one another. So, I could go to my neighbor and they would watch me. Or, the neighbor would come to my house. My parents would watch their kids. That's the life in the city and [the] village. So, we're very open we're not isolating. Everyone knows each other. Yeah.

KL: What did the neighborhood look like? Take me down the street.

MM: In the city, it would be pretty modern back then, 1970. I don't really remember much, but, I am very good with food. So, shopping, store—night market is where all the food you can eat, sweet food. Very inexpensive. You could spend twenty-five cent[s] and be full for the night. Well, twenty-five cents American currency. Like, one-thousand riel, Cambodian. Maybe back then. The color is more higher. So, that's the city life. The village life, there's a temple. I don't see any schools. There's a temple, there's just house after house. Under the house, the backyard there's a hut for pig, chickens, duck. So, farming lifestyle, you know. In that sense. The cool thing about cow[s], for me is, in the morning they let it go. And then, at night the cow will find its way back home. So, you don't really have to like, do, watching the cow. I haven't done that cause I was so young. [I was] pretty much in the care of my grandmother. Not much my mother—and the village's ladies. Then war came. We would travel from the capitol to a semi-capitol called Sihanoukville, which is very ocean front view. There I remember more, because I'm older. Yeah, I'm about five now. I knew that there was—started pre-K. I lived in a farm house that has, cow[s], chicken[s], pigs, dogs, geese. A pineapple plantation, banana plantation, and sugar cane plantation. So, there's not a day that I don't have food. There's plenty to eat. Again, the neighbor[s] were very friendly to one another. We share most of our stuff. That's about it.

KL: What was your grandmother like?

MM: My grandmother was [a] very very strict lady. I don't have good relationshi) with her because, she's so strict that I hate her. (laughter) Um, yeah, grandmother from my mother's side. She's, um, she was Chinese. And, yes, she was Chinese and her house rule was very strict. I'm supposed to be a lady like granddaughter, and I wasn't. So, that's the conflict, right there. She would always want me to wear dresses and never get it dirty. And I'm not—I wasn't that type. I was always out playing, in shorts. Just typical, American's call it, tomboy style. Or maybe it was just, in the lead, or control mode.

KL: Now, was the community Buddhist?

MM: Oh, yes. Very, very Buddhist. We even practiced at home. In the house, there is a room that has Buddha's statue. We call it, little meditate room. At night, we go to the room. My grandmother would lead the meditation chants. Followed by my mother, and my father. Not much of me. But, that was that. And then, we go to the temple every weekend. At the temple, that's the cool thing, I liked to go to the temple because I have friend(s). My friends were monkeys. Until, one time, I got attacked by a female monkey. It wasn't pleasant because I didn't realize how jealous these animals [were] until that moment. Because, I was playing with the male monkey. And then, here comes this mother and baby monkey, jump over and attacked me. I was rescued by my dad. But yeah, I learned quickly that monkeys can be very, dangerous.

KL: Did you have brothers and sisters?

MM: I did. I have one brother who was fifteen years older than me. We have different dad(s). His dad was Cambodian. My dad's Chinese. So, my mother remarried to a Chinese boy, after she was (inaudible) with my brother for twelve years, thirteen years. So were fifteen years, exactly fifteen years different [in] age.

KL: Now, your mother, did she bring Chinese traditions into the home.

MM: No. I think looking back now, because she is Cambodian; that was probably the main conflict between me and my grandmother. Because, my grandmother still wanted me to speak Chinese, and practice a strict Chinese culture. And, my mother doesn't know how to do that. So, in Cambodian culture they say one phrase, "you're mad at the cow, but you beat the wagon instead." Yeah, and that's kind of interpreting. Yeah, I think that's what it was, she was mad at my mother, but she's always taking [it out] at me. And, being Makara, I don't take that well.

KL: So, it was your father that was Chinese?

MM: Yes.

KL: Okay, excuse me, I had it backwards.

MM: Right, right.

KL: Now, the war came in the '70's, when you were quite young, right?

MM: Correct.

KL: Okay. Do you remember much of that?

MM: Yes. An awful, awful war. I knew, probably two years prior to that dark moment. Because there's always bombing, here and there. In the cities, there's bomb(s). In the village, there's bomb(s). So, we usually go in to a, what is it called, under the ground—a cave, sort of, for shelter. At one point in the city, my parents were sick. I had to stay with the neighbor. The bomb came at night, and they all left me. They left to a different place, the neighbor did. And then, it was me and the pig farm. So, I went in to the pig's house, and tried to seek safety. I was there all night until morning. They came back, and the owner of the house said to me, "Is all of the pigs here?" And I said, "Yeah, oh you expected me to take care of the pig?" And, she said "Yeah." And I'm like, "Oh, okay it's here."

KL: That must have been pretty frightening.

MM: Yeah, It did, because, everything come—Scaring, loneliness. It seems like yesterday, that moment came. It was just, over the years that flash back of them coming and it's like "oh, are the pigs alive?" and "Is all the pigs here?" to understand adult greed. And, mean, madness, and selfishness. It's just like, seriously, because my parents not here, you left me here? But, that was then. That was then. So, when we moved to Sihanoukville, that's when the darkest day came. It was new year. And then, celebrating New Year, there is a lot of celebration, dancing, singing different food. For two days in a row. The third day, during the daytime it was the same celebration. At night it was changed completely. Because, all of a sudden, everyone seems to be quiet, packing. It was just odd to me. About four, I think, four or five a.m., we heard these announcing from the intercom. It was in a car. Oh, it was a convertible jeep coming by. They said, "Everyone leave, America is bombing the city."

KL: So, this what? Not Khmer Rouge? This was American bombs?

MM: This is Khmer Rouge, 1975. But that was the message that we got. "Americans bombed the city, leave the city for three days, and come back." That's the message that we got. "Don't take anything, just leave." I took my piggy bank. My mother took bags of money. That's valuable stuff. My dad [was] kind of suspicious something really went wrong. Because, being a police officer, he heard something, but he didn't tell us completely. That's another thing, those are adult conversations. We're not allowed to understand, or listen in. So, he packed pots and pans, but just a few. My brother brought a bag of rice or so. And I'm like, "Hmm, Why did you..?" He said, "Well, three days, we'll probably use it on the way." We left. But then, I went to my neighbor's home. And, I skipped that part so, we left the house, joining hundreds of people from the same village on the road. Just keep on going. We questioned each other like, "Where are we going?" They said, "Just keep, just , you know, leave town. Leave the city. So we left. For me, I've never been to that city, or that town since April 17, 1975. I joined hell. It's the only description I can tell you. I, yeah that's a moment of darkness. Year zero. Everything

started the moment of that announcement came. Sometimes I question myself, “Why am I still here?” There’s many others have encountered death, and I’m still alive. So, sometimes I celebrate the moment. I’m alive, I’m strong, I have [a] message, I have [a] purpose to achieve. And, when those moments come, it’s like, probably, it would be best if I were dead. But, those are the conflict[s] of my childhood, of my life all along.

KL: I want to make sure I understand clearly. It was Khmer Rouge, that was moving in to your neighborhood?

MM: Yes.

KL: Okay. And, that’s where the bombing was coming from?

MM: There was no bomb.

KL: Oh, okay, they were just telling you it was coming. I see.

MM: They were just telling us. And then, in every Cambodian that was the message. But, when Khmer Rouge invaded Cambodia, from the day [of] the invasion until the end, there was no American bomb. American bomb[ing] was happening prior to the invasion. Everybody knows that Americans are bombing the city, leave for three days.

KL: You must have been what, four or five years old?

MM: I was five.

KL: You were five.

MM: I was five.

KL: Pretty young.

MM: Yeah.

KL: So, you left the city, and you were on the road. Did you know where you were going?

MM: No, I did not. Nobody did. The goal is to leave the city as fast as we can. Where would we end up being, was because, my dad was very smart because he sensed something was wrong. So, he left to a new... They forced us in to [the]forest. So, the city people, this is the whole plan was to forest villagers come to the city. The city goes to the village. So, because of our lack of understanding working, like physical work, most of us died. Because when you get to the village, like my dad, he doesn’t know how to do farming, probably. Plus, he had a light skin. So there’s two thing[s] against him. One, he was a man, he doesn’t know how to do farming well. So that’s one cross. Second, he had light skin, so that’s another thing that they don’t want. You’re Chinese, you’re a foreigner. Therefor you die. They kill you. For my brother, who is college educated, a college student. They use him for document filings, book keeping, and all that stuff. We don’t know what happened to him, because they took him to a different village,

and we had no contact. When we get really in to the forest, in to the farm, they divided all of us by group. Different gender, different age group, so everybody is separated. I got separated from my parents, I believe, June of 1975, until November, or maybe June of 1979. No contact, nothing.

KL: Were you in a camp at this time?

MM: Yeah.

KL: What was that like? Can you describe that?

MM: Life in, during Khmer Rouge was, besides hard work, there's nothing else. You work or you die. My job start[ed] at four in the morning, until noon. Lunch was a bowl of water with a few grains of rice, if you cooperate. I wasn't a kid that cooperates. (laughter). Most of the days I had just a bowl of water. You have to have done well in order to get four or five grains of rice with your water. So, I ate whatever I could get my hands on; crickets, frogs—this is not big frogs, they are little baby frogs. What are they called? Grasshoppers, grass itself. We had all kinds of leaves and fruit. Whatever the animals eat, I would eat.

KL: What kind of work were you doing?

MM: Work was, sometimes you carry ground, because they [were] building [a] bridge. We worked, we would carry the land and then, pass it to the adult[s] to build a bridge. Sometimes you go to the field and carry the rice stalks. It depended on the day. Whatever the seasons come to, you do all of that. You do the same work as adults. You, I have, well everybody in my barracks center, there was at least a hundred kids age, under ten. One to ten. Then our leader would be a teenager, maybe age fifteen, seventeen. No adults, well there's two adults. The chef, the ones who cooks for us. I would sleep in—I only had, during three and a half years, I had two pairs of clothes. Whatever I wore for that whole first year. I would go to bed when it was wet. I would go to bed when it's dry. So, I had only one pair, there was no changing clothes. There's a sheet, we called it [a] blanket, but there's like a sheet of, there's a sheet that we all share. Seven or ten of us, and we have this one white sheet. We just cover ourselves at night. And at night, we have to be guards, so you sleep for a couple hours, and then you wake up and you protect, it's your shift to guard the whole barracks. If anybody run[s] away, anything like that.

KL: How did you come to leave Cambodia?

MM: Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1979. I remember, I was pretty smart. I remember, I came back to where we first got in that village. The village [is] called, or the province [is] called Koh Kong. Which is another town that's very close to Thailand, the Thai border. So, I came back to the town, where it was. And I was just waiting. It was told that everybody go to your parents. Go to the barracks and have supper. (inaudible) They said, "This is done, you have to go to your relative, or go find your parents." I came to where we were first dropped. The location that we first arrived there. And then, I was there for two days, three days. Nobody came to

claim who I was. One day went by, no one came, I didn't see anybody. I started to cry a little, fall asleep. Eat some bananas, and then fall asleep under the big, maybe mango tree. I think it was. Or maybe coconut tree. I'm not sure what kind of tree it was. Second day went by. Now I'm getting really scared, cause no food for the first day. Second day, really, no banana, definitely no food. I start to cry more, but then nobody show(ed) up. Third day, third morning, about, you know, ten, eleven o'clock. I saw this old lady walk towards me. And then, she asked me. My nickname is mum, m-u-m. She said, "Are you mum?" I recognized her voice, and I said, "Yes." That's my mom. So then she said, "Where's your dad?" She said, "Where's pa?" And I said, "Nope." "Where is my brother?" "Nope." And then she started to go down the list of all my relative[s], forty-three other people. After number ten or so she just break down crying. So, we stay right at that location for another half a day. Then she took me in to town to find food. Then we left the location. So, forty-five family members when the war began. After the war, two left.

KL: You and your mother.

MM: Me and my mother, in rags. Our body looked like skeletons, and our clothes was rags. So, we were two skeletons covered in rags.

KL: So, from there, how did you leave Cambodia?

MM: My mom had, she was, it took us a long time because, we were busy searching for my other relative[s]. So, we would go to different village, [to] try to find them. And then, managed to come to another province, it's called Kampot. Which is also alongside of the ocean. By the sea. We stayed there for a couple months. And then, she discovered a radio. With radio she listen to Voice of America. So, Voice of America said that on the border, the Thai border, there is a camp setting for refugee[s]. Cambodian refugees. My mother doesn't know how to get to [the] Thai border. But, luckily there was a lady who—neighbor of ours, who had the same goal. She wanted to go to the—and, and we had some gold. Back then there's no currency, we used gold to buy our way out of the country. She used that, and then the three of us left. Most of the time we walked, so it took us a long time. Walking at night, sleep in the morning. Yeah, sleep during the day, and then you walk at night, trying to cross over. So, from one town, to the next, to the next. We finally make it to the border, but this is between, there's a town called Battambang on Thai border. That's a critical town, a critical crossing because, there's mines, there's Khmer Rouge guerrilla, there's Vietnamese soldier, there's government soldiers. They don't want us to leave. So that's (a) life and death moment. If your crossing that line then you're considered the best one. You finally make it through. So, in order to leave, to make it through, you have to buy your way out. That time it was gold, that my mom and the lady had.

KL: So you said you bribed your way out.

MM: Very, very much so. Definitely the bribe, yeah.

KL: So, you got in to Thailand? Is that right?

MM: Correct.

KL: Okay, and did you stay in Thailand for a while?

MM: Oh yes. When we got in to Thailand we used most of, or maybe all of the gold my mom had. But, it was good because, at the Thai border there was a United Nation, Red Cross, UNHCR¹, a whole group of NGO² foreigners who rescue people. Tens of thousands of people. They provide us with plastic sheets. We make our huts out of that. And then, we have clean water. There's food. Food for free, big one. Hospital. Right away they started school. We had some new clothes, some clothes. And then, we also, over the years we got donation clothes from, [the] Catholic church I believe. So, it's everything. It's just, the best of the best. We stayed there for, maybe three and a half years. We submitted [an] application, petition to come to America based on my dad's status. He was a police officer. Not anything about surviving, we don't identify ourselves as that. She's just a widow of a police officer. And then, we won the lottery to come to the U.S. Some people go to different countries, but we came to U.S. From Thai border, we went to Philippine camp. Stayed there for five, six month(s), to learn English. Forty-five minutes a day of English language. I learned how to say, "Hello, how are you?" and "Fine, thank you." And whatever you said to me, I don't know. (laughter)

KL: And then, you came to the U.S.

MM: And then I came to the U.S. I arrived in San Francisco. They gave us a coat. This big thick coat. We came like something like right now, summertime. Cambodia is a tropical, hot, humid country, so we came in flip-flops and shirts and stuff. Through interpreter my mom said, "What is this for?" It was January, 1984. She said to my mother, "Your state is cold, snow. So you need this." That was Boston. She said, "Oh, okay." Taking it very lightly about the cold, but already complaining that, "Oh, this is so heavy and thick." Waited for the airline to pick us up from San Francisco, arrive at Logan airport at night. I think it was ten or eleven o'clock at night. When I got up I was so excited to see snow. And I said, "Oh, it's cold, but I'm gonna do—Well, I'm gonna be rich." The gentleman who picked me up was a neighbor, he was my sponsor, and the Cambodian community neighbor. He said, "In what way, why are you going to be rich?" And I said, "In the morning I'm gonna start scooping this ice and put some syrup on, and I'm going to sell it to people. I'm gonna make so much money. You know how priceless snow, I call it ice, ice is in our country. That's very hard—Only rich people are able to have ice, so now this is my business plan. He said, "Yeah? Good luck." I guess I had so much snow on that first day.

KL: You're about ten or twelve by now, is that right?

¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

² Non Governmental Organizations

MM: fourteen.

KL: Fourteen.

MM: Yeah, until I—from that spot. I thought it was just that one spot, but when I got in the car, keep on going, there's more, and more. and more. And I said to him, "Is this everywhere?" He said, "Oh yeah. It's everywhere. We don't know what to do with it. (laughter) Oh, I think that right there my plans already changed. (inaudible) From Logan airport to Boston, Mass, it was quite a ride. Yeah.

KL: So, you were in Massachusetts for a while?

MM: I was in Boston for six months. Then we moved to Lowell, Mass. Because, Lowell had a grocery store. Lowell had a Cambodian grocery store, and the population back in 1985, probably twenty families in Lowell. So everybody in Massachusetts tended to move to Lowell. Because we wanted to build a community. So we moved to Lowell; all of us moved to Lowell in September of 1985, yeah.

KL: And then later, you came to Maine?

MM: Yes, I lived in Lowell for sixteen years. I moved to Maine in 2001.

KL: So, do you like it here?

MM: Really, yes.

KL: Why did you decide to come to Maine?

MM: Well, after living in Massachusetts for, ten years I think, I was arranged to marry my husband in Cambodia, by my mother and her distant relative. After I got married, I had two kid[s]. And then we wanted to, not we, he wanted to—He hated the cold, so he wanted to do farming, grow vegetables and all that stuff. So, we sold our home and all that stuff, and moved to Florida, to do farming. That's another good resource, all after the big money, without doing little work. That was the dream. When we got to Florida, we had no equipment. We had five acres of land we bought. It's not going to work. I don't know how to do it. We have no equipment. We don't have enough money to invest in this stuff. It's definitely not going to work. And then we said fine, we made so much money from selling the home we bought in Lowell. We said, "Good, we don't have to do this. We will travel." So, we took a year off, just traveled. Then 9/11 hit. He—I don't know how they—I guess hatred just pushed on him, because they accused him of [being a] middle east guy. I said, "We're Cambodian. In what way [can] you call him middle east[ern]." After a few encounters, I said to my mother, "we have to leave Florida, because we can't do farming. We're done with our explore/adventure thing." And she said, "Yeah you can move back, but don't go back to Lowell because it's bad karma. You don't go back to where your from, you go back to a different town, state. The price of house(s) was bubbled so we couldn't find any homes anywhere. We have a relative in South Portland. I

called them up and said,” Your upstairs garage; just clean it cause we’ll show up in three days, and we’re gonna use it.” And he said, “W-w-what, say what?” And I said, “We’re homeless, and we need your space. We’re not gonna bother you, we’re gonna use your garage, on top of your garage.” And then he said, “Okay.” He was nice enough to clean it all up and make it comfortable as possible for us. So, there’s five of us living on top of his garage for three months. Then we found a home in Portland. Bought it, and then, we stayed here since.

KL: Did people accept you in the U.S. in Maine? Were they friendly, or?

MM: I am very fortunate, a very lucky person; yes, very lucky person. And at the same time, I’m the type of person to, does not take no, from anyone. If you told me ,no, I said, “Thank you very much.” I go to the next person and ask the same question until I get a resource, a direction, and a yes. So, I would say I was very lucky. Having said that, was there a challenge of anything? Yes. Most of all would be the communication—Yeah, the communication. For my whole life, since when I’ve arrived. Until now I’ve been waiting for someone to say to me, “What is it that you wanted to do?” That question hasn’t been asked, it’s always. “You do this, and you will get to here.” It was fine for the moment, or at the time, that was a fine way. Until now, I would say. If only staff, social worker, school, doctor would say, “How are you?”, “How’s your life?”, “What is it that you want?”. It would have been a different picture, but I don’t remember any of those questions being asked of me. So, my life went very quickly. I learned to take care of my mother, instead of my mom taking care of me. I learned to take care of, volunteer [for] the community, take care of the community. I became an advocate, an activist. I just made myself into (inaudible). It was nonstop for me. But, through the whole time, it’s been pretty successful until three years ago. When all the problems collapsed, is when I realized, huh, time to stop. Take a break and then look back. By that time I was just so active, speeding time. I don’t even know how to take a break. Yeah, but go back to [not] having anyone except me. I had some problems during my high school, because I was there based on my age. Not much testing. And, when I have questions, I don’t ask. Because, I don’t know what to ask. I was old enough, fifteen or eighteen. I was old enough to work, and feed, or donate to other people besides my relatives that needed more. So, you know. Yeah.

MM: I understand you’re pretty good with food.

MM: Not with my cooking. Only a few dish[es]. I’m very good with food because, I find food in the central, or center of conversation. Anybody can relate to food. That’s what lead me to... All because I don’t want to be starved. Because, I understand going to bed hungry. Or, not having enough to eat was horrible. So, that’s what prompt me to have grocery store. And then, grocery store/community center. Because, it’s not just an international food seller and go. I also develop a strong connection with my customer. Most of them, I know them by name. And, their

children[s] name and all that stuff. It was very unique experience. Cooking myself, I do like to cook. I only know a few dish by heart.

KL: So you run a grocery store?

MM: I ran a grocery store for eight years. I bought it as an Asian grocery store. Within a year, I turned it in to an international gathering. That's what I called it. After work everyone rushes in, and talking over everything. Friday night would be another big one, and then the weekend. So, yeah.

KL: Okay, why a grocery store?

MM: Why a grocery store?

KL: Mm-Hmm.

MM: Good question. I was accepted to nursing. Everything was all set. Enrolling in nursing internship. And then, I found out the store [was] for sale. I said, "Nursing or stores? Let's buy the store instead." So, I dropped the internship, of nursing, and bought the stores.

KL: What was it that made the store attractive to you? Being your own boss, or?

MM: No, I walked in the store, and I had a sense that, I'm gonna do well. This is a good location. I can serve a lot of people. I can hear the communication, strong communication from the store. Not being my own boss. Being flexible. Because, I don't like being called the boss. I like the flexibility, because I had an elderly mother. I have two autistic child[ren]. Then, I have a young son, who is only six months old then. Right there, when I name it, I'm already crazy to go to work. (laughter)

KL: Now, did you go through the citizenship process?

MM: Oh, yes, I did.

KL: Tell me about that.

MM: Citizenship process, it is a big deal. Because, when I came here, I knew that after five years of your green card. They call it green card, but we didn't have a green card back then. It was a card that said, I-94, it was paper, no bar code, no fancy thing on it. I think it was just a typed name on it. But, I was told that, in five years you can become an American citizen. So, every single year is critical. We mark it all down. Five years up. Before five, like three months before my five years, I submitted my application process. Got it right away. I knew the cost of it was forty-five dollars, to become an American citizen. So I can't wait to become an American citizen.

KL: Do you remember the testing and things that went with it?

MM: Back then, it only had ten questions. They were written questions. And, I think we had to study, there was a handout. Maybe fifty odd questions that make up I didn't attend any other school, it was just self teaching. But I was pretty smart. I taught myself, and I passed the test.

KL: Tell me about the day you were naturalized, when you went before the judge.

MM: Did we do that, or did they just send us the...? I don't remember. That, I don't remember. That was 1994.

KL: It was a while ago, yeah.

MM: Yeah, I don't quite remember. But, I know it was not like right now. There's a lot of celebration and party, right.

KL: Now, when you came here, did you keep a lot of the traditions from Cambodia?

MM: Good question, because in that part because my mom was old, and she lived with me all her life. So, tradition is a gift coming from her part every formal day, new years and water fest, and all that stuff. She's the one who remembered. And she's the one who set up, preparation. We just enjoyed the festivity. But, we do keep it very close to the community, and all that stuff. We have a temple. So, if you don't have a chance to go to the temple, based on the schedule. We would contribute our share to the temple, everywhere we lived. Either Massachusetts or here. So, we are pretty active that way. With my mother, it is also a great gift, because she does not speak English. She refuses to speak English, so it's a great benefit for my children. They have that background of extra language. Hearing because she is talking all the time in Khmer.

KL: Do you still speak Khmer?

MM: Yes, and that's part of my job, as an interpreter.

KL: Your mother didn't want to give up Khmer?

MM: No, she doesn't.

KL: Was it just a matter of difficulty, or was it more than that?

MM: She complains [that] she can't learn. So, difficulty at one point. And then, the other point, knowing now, she is having a hard time with the trauma that she went through was too unbearable. We don't really talk about what had happened to us. We had our own suffering, we didn't share. When she was alive, we didn't talk about what happened in the three years. We never discussed about it. Someday she said to me, "It's good to go to school, you need your education." Tomorrow she would say, "Stop studying, because somebody is going to kill you. So, it's that contradictive conversation that I have, like, what do I want? And, very close and personal because I had been through that. Yes, what she said is true, because my brother never show[ed] up. My uncle, my aunt, my father. So, what she said is true, somebody is going to

come and kill me. And then I would say, “No it’s not. This is America.” So, what should I do. Then I become—I took [a] job as a way out. So, we ignore this whole thing.

KL: Your family didn’t speak very much about what happened, with Khmer Rouge.

MM: No.

KL: Is your mother still living?

MM: No. I became very active, open, since she passed away. When I go home, when somebody did an interview at home it was just laughing because I would say, “I wouldn’t do this if she was alive.”

KL: Why is that?

MM: Because she doesn’t permit that. For her belief, it was the past. Time to sweep it under the rug, move on. You’re doing well. Don’t focus on that negative aspect, horrible aspect, just keep going. As a teenager the nightmare haunt[ed] me, but I can’t tell her. I would sometimes quietly talk to teachers at school, or something like that. But, I would say, “Make sure it didn’t go back to my mother. She can’t hear this.” I remember the first open interview, in 2009 or 2008, I mentioned one encounter of torturing to the newspaper. Of course, it’s newspaper, and Portland Press Herald, everybody’s reading it. My relative read it, and it came back to her. She wasn’t pleased. She was not pleased. She would say, “How many time do I tell you, that was past. It’s very bad that you let your information out. And, I said. “OH, okay.”

KL: You mentioned one holiday, I think that I really didn’t catch the name of. I know there’s a New Year celebration in the Cambodian community. Do you celebrate that?

MM: Yes. That’s April—between April 14 and April 17. I can’t forget that day. Cause, in my life there’s two things that happened that day. April 17, 1975, was the day of the Khmer Rouge invasion. April 17, 2000, that’s my second son’s birthday. So, every single year there is mixed feelings. Many other celebrations would be, The loon celebration, water fest celebration. The other one is more like a Halloween, but we celebrate it differently. Not anybody wearing costumes. You would go to the temple, and give to the death of your ancestor, so that’s big. Buddha’s birthday, Buddha’s death. So, a lot.

KL: I promised I wouldn’t take much more than an hour of your time, but

MM: It’s okay.

KL: I have been entranced.

MM: I had another appointment, but I extended it till five o clock. So, if you have anymore questions it’s okay.

KL: I apologize for changing your schedule.

MM: No, no. No problem.

KL: Is there anything that I'm overlooking, that you want to point out to me?

MM: The joys and the opportunities of being in America. I have a lot more positive than negative aspects, in general. I had an opportunity to go to school. I went when I was young. And then, I went back when I was older, had two children. I went back to school. That's a plus right there. When it is said, "America is a land of opportunity," it is very true. That, when you want it, nobody can stop you. Just keep on doing it. I have a lot, in my life. Somehow it always works out. I'm just the type to not take, no. Giving back to the community, what I had received. I'm giving it back being a part of the community. As an immigrant, we appreciate, and we want the natives, also, to not look at us as a handout. or (inaudible). Many of us that came, we made the best of America. And, we cherish that, as coming from hard working. Like myself, it's not that I benefit. There's three or four village[s] in Cambodia, that I sponsor, build, helping out through the year[s]. So, it's a very, very power up energy, blessing, for the opportunity to be here.

KL: One other thing I wanted to ask you about. You talked about travel. Have you been back to Cambodia?

MM: I have, my latest was 2013. The first time I was there for three weeks. I came back to the states to take care of the store, then I went back for a week to celebrate my mother burial, hundred-day burial. My children, four of them, had stayed there, for three months. The whole summer. So, they had a taste of what it's like to not have enough food. What it's like to not have clean water. I was a financial and successful lady prior to 2013. So, they have everything, spoiled, I can put. My second son, who loves dinosaurs, he has all kinds of dinosaurs, books, the robot dinosaurs and all that stuff. After he lived there for three months, he came back and he said, "Can you sell all this, because I want to take the money and, give it to those kids." From there, he grew a new vocabulary. Everything he wants he [used to] say, "Mommy, I need to have this, it's important." It's everything to him. Now he would say, "I don't want it anymore." He would wear clothes and say, "That's fine." Shoes definitely would wear out before he bought a new pair. He doesn't want any brand name, because those cost a lot of money. Whatever the cost. The cost can provide to other people who need it most. He's sixteen now so he understood that. The two young ones they not really, they understood. And then, the oldest one is pretty autistic so not much.

KL: It has been a pleasure talking to you. I really appreciate you taking the time to for me.

MM: You're very welcome.

KL: I don't think I have ever met such a tower of strength.

MM: Thank you so much.

KL: Is there anything in the interview that needs restricting, or anything like that?

END OF INTERVIEW