

Oral History Interview with
Socheth Na

Conducted February 12, 1997
by Jean Sytsma

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interviewer: Jean Sytsma

JS: We're interviewing Socheth Na. Socheth is pastor of the Cambodian Church and at this time he will be answering a few questions. Go ahead.

SN: I was born in Cambodia before I came to Holland, Michigan. I came to Holland, Michigan, and got in touch with Holland, Michigan, first time in 1988. I am married and have two children. My wife's name, Lynn, and my sons, Stefan and Daniel. I have lived in Cambodia from 1953 to 1979. From 1979 till 1981, I lived in Thailand. In part of 1981 I lived in Philippine. My family came to the United States in 1981. We lived in Columbus, Ohio. Then we lived in Denver, Colorado, and then we came to live in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Finally, then, to Holland, Michigan in 1991.

JS: OK, Socheth, tell us a little bit what brought you to the United States.

SN: The reason that my family came to the United States, as you may know, in the middle of 1970, Cambodia fell to Communists. Our people had to go to the rice field to perform their duty as farmers. In that time, so many people were killed, soldiers, students and government workers. Myself, I was a student during that time. My family left Cambodia in 1979, after the Vietnamese Communists took over Cambodia. The reason that I left Cambodia is because I saw that if I lived in Cambodia, I won't be able to continue my education anymore.

JS: So, your reasons for coming to the United States was because the government was overthrown by the Communists. You fled to a refugee camp and from there, you

were sponsored by whom?

SN: My family was sponsored by USCC, called United States Catholic Conference.

JS: And they brought you to Ohio.

SN: Yes, Columbus, Ohio.

JS: How long did you stay in Columbus, Ohio?

SN: I stayed in Columbus, Ohio for six months because our job situation over there was so poor. So, my family decided to move to Denver, Colorado, in early 1982.

JS: When you say your family, who was your family at that time?

SN: That's my extended family, my father, my two brothers, and his family.

JS: When you arrived in Denver, Colorado, what was your contact there?

SN: When I arrived in Colorado, my wife, Lynn, she used to be my high school classmate in Cambodia.

JS: From there, after you were in Colorado for a couple of years, you had told me you worked for the phone company?

SN: I had worked for the phone company, AT&T from 1983 till 1987. During that time I had contact with a Christian church called Third Christian Reformed Church. I have attended in the church and I profess my faith in 1983. I worked for the church as a translator from English to Cambodian every Sunday from 1983 to 1987. Then in late 1987, God called me to come to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to learn to be a pastor to Cambodian people.

JS: It was while you were in Grand Rapids you became acquainted with the Cambodians in Holland, correct?

- SN: Yes, while I was studying in the Reformed Bible College, I got in touch with Cambodians in Holland in early 1988.
- JS: From there, Graftschaap Church found out about you and you started teaching Bible classes after Pastor Rick Keekenvelt left, correct?
- SN: Yes, when I was studying in the Reformed Bible College, I worked part time, usually on Saturday and Sunday to help people during Bible study and to translate the sermon on Sunday for Cambodian people.
- JS: What kind of changes have you seen in Holland in the past nine years? When you first came to Holland, in late 1987, early 1988, Holland was quite different than it is today. Tell us some of the changes that you have observed.
- SN: Holland changed so much from late 1980 to now. Before there were not many companies in this area. Right now, there are a lot of companies that build and expand from west to east, north to south. There are a lot of people who came over to Holland, right now. Diverse people live all over.
- JS: Do you feel that Holland has been receptive to your people?
- SN: In comparing to other big cities in the United States, Holland accepts other cultures better than the other places.
- JS: As far as the city of Holland, do you feel that they have tried to assimilate your people in the schools, in the local civic organizations, in city hall, in different organizations within Holland? Do you feel that they have tried to accept your people, tried to get them involved?
- SN: Yes, they do. But the problem is, my people do not want to be involved. That's one

of my jobs, to help them involved with the community, in the schools, that way they can learn something.

JS: Do you feel that Holland has some negative aspects for your people?

SN: Well, I'll tell you what, it doesn't matter where ever you go, whatever you do, where ever you live, you're always faced with that. But, Holland, as I said before, comparing to other big cities in the United States, there is less of that obstacle.

JS: I'm well aware that there are several Cambodians who have attended Hope College. What has been there feedback to you as far as the quality of education and acceptance?

SN: The quality of education at Hope College, as far as I know, and as far as people have told me, is higher than the other colleges and universities.

JS: Do you feel that Hope College has been acceptant and tried to assimilate your people within the various organizations at Hope College?

SN: Yes.

JS: When you say that Holland has grown a lot in the last eight years, or ten years, do you feel that it's grown as far as bringing in different people from different cultures and different areas of the United States, or do you feel that Holland has only grown in the aspect of bringing in people from different companies? Do you feel that Holland has grown as far as taking in refugees? I guess that would be the correct way of asking you this question.

SN: I think that Holland has grown in different directions. One, Holland tried to involve the people in the community to work together for better living in this city. Holland

tried to help the people in this community to understand each other, to give value to each other. Secondly, Holland gives hope to everyone, it doesn't matter where they came from, whatever they are, whoever they are. We were as family, together. That's why Holland became the best ten city to live in, in the United States.

JS: How do you feel Holland has been as far as getting the people from different countries and different areas involved in the church. Do you think we've done a good job with that?

SN: I think we have done a good job in that. To involve people physically and spiritually. We have to provide people with physical and spiritual needs.

JS: Now, it's been said that there are more Laotians than Cambodians and more Cambodians than Vietnamese in Holland. How would you rate Holland as far as population in the Cambodian community?

SN: According to my understanding, the Cambodian population in Holland is larger than Laotian and Vietnamese. In the early 1980's, we had around one hundred families. But right now, that amount is tripled because we have so much job opportunity in this area. A lot of people moved from other states to come to this city.

JS: So, you would say that Holland is known to be a second migration place? They might be sponsored in Ohio, they might be sponsored in California, but once they realize the opportunities aren't there, they will come here?

SN: That is correct, yes. These families came to Holland through their family.

JS: What would you estimate the Cambodian population to be at this time?

SN: At this time, I estimate that there are about more than four hundred families who live

in Holland, Michigan, right now.

JS: So, you would say the population is about 1,600?

SN: Close to that, yes.

JS: How many Laotian families do you feel?

SN: AS far as I know, a friend of mine with Laotian association and Laotian church, they told me roughly they have around 250 families.

JS: How many Vietnamese families do you think?

SN: About 60 families.

JS: What do you think we as a city can do to improve our relationships with people from other countries and nationalities?

SN: My suggestion is to learn and try to understand each other's culture and give value to each other's cultures. Let those people get involved in the community. Don't just try to understand about their problem, but listen to them as well.

JS: What would be one suggestion?

SN: One suggestion is, we have to do our best. The schools, the community, the government and the church. Try to involve these people in those areas.

JS: Do you feel that ten years from now, we will have Cambodian leaders within the city of Holland? Or do you feel that the people who will get an education and go on to college will leave Holland of your people?

SN: We have to understand that the young people is our future generation for the Holland area. Cambodian young people right now are in high school, in college and university. I don't think they will leave Holland completely. Some of them will

become the leaders of Holland in the future.

JS: It has been said that many Cambodia people push their children at school academically. Do you feel that this is a true statement or do you feel that this is a statement that has been unjustly said about your people?

SN: I think that is right. Myself, I feel that way, too, because I know that education is a bright future for my children. So, I have to push them a little bit hard.

JS: Tell us a little bit about are you involved with any clubs or organizations in Holland?

SN: Since I came to Holland, Michigan, I have been involved with a lot of organizations. In order to learn more about this organization, to get involved myself with the community, and to offer my help to those organizers. It is a way to help my people to get involved and to grow in this city.

JS: What are the names of these organizations that you're involved with?

SN: I have gotten involved with Community Action House, H.O.M.E., Good Samaritan Ministry, Holland Public Schools, Holland Christian School, and with many churches' organizations in this area as well.

JS: As far as you feel, you think Holland has been very good for your people as far as providing them good jobs, homes, and a good education.

SN: Yes.

JS: Do you feel that there could be any improvement in any of these three areas that I've mentioned?

SN: I think that Holland could be improved in one area in order to help these people much better. One is to have a company to train some of the people

who do not know enough language. So, that they way they can catch up with their life. They can improve their living as well.

JS: It is my understanding that Bilmar Foods provides ESL, English Second Language classes. It has also been brought to my attention that over at community education, they used to have a program for the Cambodians. Are there any other programs that you feel Holland provided for the Cambodian people that were quite helpful at the time?

SN: I think that those companies who have ESL programs in their companies to teach people about English language is very helpful to Cambodian people. But, just for those who are in their company already. But for those who are outside, did not get into the companies yet, they have no opportunity to learn those English, they had no opportunity to get a job, to be hired, to work in their company.

JS: How about community education? Don't they provide the same type of training and tools that Bilmar and some of these request foods provides on site? Am I correct on that?

SN: Yes, you are correct. But, you have to understand that people who are over thirty, it's not easy to study. This because they are struggling outside, trying to find a job. As you may know, Holland right now tries to hire people who have more education. They have to know how to read and to write, and most companies offer a lot of tests. If these people don't pass, they won't be able to get jobs. Before, to get into Bilmar and request foods, you did not have to know how to speak English. You can get in so easily, but not now. You have to know how to speak and to communicate if you

want to have a job.

JS: We talked about how companies can help people. Now, let's talk a little bit about the churches in Holland. You know, in 1979, the first Cambodians came and I've been involved with them ever since they came. How do you feel that the churches, and there have been quite a few changes in the Christian Reformed Church in the last couple years, maybe you can tell us a little bit about that? How you feel or how you view it.

SN: Well, since I've gotten to know the Christian Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, for the last fifteen years, this denomination changed so much. They step out from their boundary to reach out to minority groups. They try to embrace all kinds of people to come into God's family. The door of Christian Reformed Church opened wider and wider to receive those people who are not Anglo. For them to be saved, for them to receive salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm so thankful that God provided me and gave me the opportunity to work in Cambodian Fellowship which is sponsored by Graafschap, Scorr, Holland Classis and the Home Mission, to reach out to Cambodian people in the greater Holland area and Grand Rapids.

JS: So, if I'm listening real carefully, you feel that Holland has been really a model in helping the Asians getting resettled.

SN: Yes, we are.

JS: What do you think is a major turning point here in Holland since you've come to Holland? It could be city wide or church wide or you tell me. Where have you seen the biggest change in Holland since you've come to Holland?

SN: The biggest change in Holland is in school. More and more public schools, right now, try to learn to understand about the other students' cultures. They try to involve parents, it doesn't matter who they are, to be a volunteer in the church. Christian schools do the same thing.

JS: Now, it's also my understanding that there are several Cambodian people that have been hired by the school system to help the Cambodian students. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

SN: Yes, as I said before, I try to involve my people as much as possible in the community as well as in the school system. Because of that, we have one lady in the public schools who right now works in four different schools in the Holland area. In 1994, my friend, who came from Connecticut, he earned a masters degree in education, came here and he got hired by Holland Public Schools. Right now he works as an assistant teacher in Holland East Middle School. He will be a certified teacher by the end of this year to teach math in Holland Public School; the other person has been hired by West Ottawa School. His name is Steve Cheung. He worked so hard to provide a service between the school and the parent at North Side. But the problem is my people feel that the student in the school do not have enough respect for these people that help them. That's why Cambodian people feel that we, as parents, we have to push harder for our children to respect older people and teachers, wherever they go, whatever they do.

JS: When people come to visit you from other cities around the United States what is there first impression of Holland?

SN: The first impression of those people who come to visit me in this Holland area is the kindness, the gentleness of these people in welcoming the stranger. You compare, when you go to New York, barely people say hi to you. But, when you come to Holland you feel like home. Whoever meets you, they always say hi to you.

JS: How do the people feel about when they drive around Holland as far as the layout of the city and the factories and the homes and the schools? How does Holland compare to other cities in that area? I know we discussed it earlier, but maybe we can discuss it a little bit more in depth. Let's take, for example, you had a friend who came from Connecticut, you told me. What was his experience when he came?

SN: Well, I'll tell you what. When my friend, he was living in Bridgeport, Connecticut, the community over there where he lived is a very dangerous place. His children could not get out from home to play outside because there are a lot of gangsters all over. They are shooting, they are fighting all over in that area. When he came here, he felt so safe, he felt at home, and he felt that his family had more freedom here. There is no dangerous place in Holland. You can go wherever you want to.

JS: A lot of people say that the 17th St., 18th St., 19th St. area is somewhat dangerous. Do you have that feeling?

SN: Well, for me, I have lived in Holland since 1991, I don't feel that way. You have to know that wherever drug is, there is some problem.

JS: You live in the West 19th St. area, you feel that's a safe area? You feel that the neighbors all respect each other? You feel that even though people say that part of

town isn't safe, you feel you live in a good part of town?

SN: I feel that I live in a good neighborhood, a safe neighborhood, in comparing to other neighborhoods.

JS: Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview? Do you feel that we have adequate health care here?

SN: I do feel that we have adequate health care in Holland, Michigan. The government, as well as the school system, and the hospital, the church, work so hard. They work together to provide the best service to the people who live in this community.

JS: How do your people feel about the rising cost of homes? In 1988, you could buy a house in the middle of the city for roughly \$40,000. Now that same house would sell for about \$58,000. Has there been any complaints about that or do they feel that the income has gone up according to the cost of the housing?

SN: I think my people do not complain much about the housing because their income is getting higher, too, comparing to four or five years ago.

JS: Do you feel there's a big generation gap in Holland between the first generation Cambodian and the second generation Cambodian?

SN: It depends, you know, how old, how young the people are when they came to the United States. The people who are involved in Cambodian fellowship, the gap is not so big. The parents are over thirty, the young people are over ten. So, we don't have big gaps in between the two groups.

JS: As far as respect and understanding and...

SN: Well, I'll tell you what, whenever you go to live in a new culture, you always stand

in the middle of the bridge. The young generation on the other side and the old generation on the other side. What we have to do is to provide a bridge for these two groups to come together to the middle to solve the problem in the family, as well as in the community.

JS: Do you feel that is going in the right direction with your people?

SN: Some of them go into the right direction, if they got involved with their children's lives, in the schools, as far as in the community. If they don't, they will be separated farther and farther from each other because of the culture shock.

JS: Tell me a little bit about culture shock. Tell me what your first reactions were when you arrived as a newly refugee. What do you think was your biggest culture shock?

SN: My big culture shock was the language, the living and the customs. As you may know, it's not easy to speak, to readjust our life into a new place, to a new language. Especially, for my own people, we have respect for parents and the younger people have respect for the older. As the first generation who came to Holland, the longer we live in this country, the more we lose our respect from young people and our children.

JS: Do you feel that's a parent problem or do you feel that's part of the culture and part of the school?

SN: I think this can be attributed to a parent's problem, to school problem, as well as to a culture problem. The main thing I can blame is to the parent. The parent can involve with the children deeper than the school system. I don't think they have too much problem with culture shock, if they try to learn to understand about this new

culture.

JS: How do you feel about Holland turning 150 years this year? Do you have any emotional feelings about that? Holland was started for religious freedoms. Holland was started by the Dutch, but, yet, if you look around, it's more than Dutch now.

SN: Well, we are different, but somehow are the same. Physical needs and spiritual needs. I just left my country for about twenty years. I miss my country, I miss my culture, I miss my people. I'm so thankful that God let Dutch people preserve their culture, they preserved their tradition in this country, in this Holland. I wish my people could do the same for their young generation.

Faith gives Cambodian refugee a positive view of life

Editor's note: The Joint Archives of Holland conducted more than 150 interviews for an oral history project to celebrate the city sesquicentennial. This is the last in a series of articles on the project.

 HOLLAND

By Kim Douglas
The Grand Rapids Press

6/28/98

In 1979, Sochet Na and his family fled through the thick jungles of Cambodia and managed to safely cross the border into Thailand. Their escape occurred during night hours to avoid detection from soldiers.

The Na family survived for two years in various refugee camps sponsored by the United Nations.

A teen-ager then, Na remembers family members made more than 200 requests for political asylum throughout the world. Finally in 1981, the United States Catholic Conference agreed to sponsor the family.

Na described the communist takeover of Cambodia, his journey to America, and perceptions of Holland in an interview conducted by the Joint Archives for the Sesquicentennial Oral History Project.

Today, as a result of Na's staunch faith, reflections of his harrowing journey from the devastation of war to freedom are positive in nature. "It was an easy journey on the ocean of life, though I wasn't a boat person," Na said.

Yet there were challenges in recovering from war and settling in a new land with a different language and customs. He remembers the difficulties he experienced settling here,

especially in terms of the language barriers.

The greatest culture shock for Na relates to the freedom of women in this country.

In Cambodia, most women work in the home as housewives and mothers and only a small minority from the city areas work away from the home.

Here in the United States, Na has observed that the majority of women work both in and out of the home, and that all too often the unfortunate result is inequity.

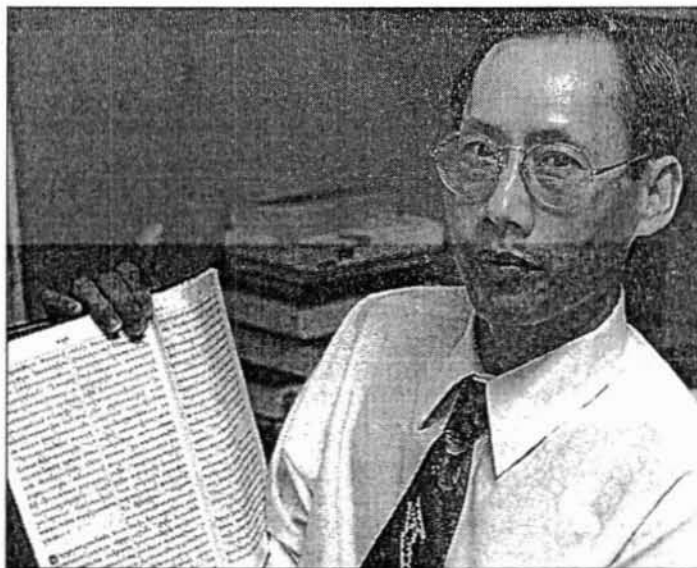
"Men need to appreciate the women, how hard they work. They work for eight hours to support the family and then come home and work more. Men take advantage of women. They sit on the sofa and watch TV while women do the housework. It's not fair," Na said.

Na moved to Holland in 1988 after studying at

Reformed Bible College in Grand Rapids. He has served as pastor of the Cambodian Church in Holland, currently operating out of Fourth Reformed Church.

Na acknowledges that many Cambodians in Holland sponsored by local congregations will attend those churches while continuing to observe traditional Buddhist practices in the privacy of their homes. "If we want to work with Buddhists you must understand what that's all about or you won't be effective," Na said.

Na has noted over the past decade that particular pastors and individuals have established and maintained friendships with some of the Cambodians, who have attended church because of these friendships, not always understanding the particulars of the Christian faith. If a priest or pastor then moved from the church, the Cambodians with



PRESS PHOTO/TERESA HERNANDEZ

Pastor Sochet Na and his family fled Cambodia in 1981, sponsored by the United States Catholic Conference.

whom that individual had a relationship didn't return to worship.

"Friendship is so important. They've been through hell in Cambodia. They need someone to love them, to be their friends and not judge them for their traditions. When they learn later what Christianity is all about, they are faithful," Na said.

Na cited that the Cambodian Church began with three individuals and has evolved to 27 households of faithful believers who love to serve.

While Na laments that many Cambodians tend to remain isolated from community life, he believes Americans can help change this tendency by taking time to develop friendships with Cambodians. Patience is needed as so many Cambodians, devastated by their government system, lost trust in their own people.

"To trust again is very challenging. People have to earn trust and build trust," Na said.

Na also believes that Americans can help by including Cambodian neighbors or coworkers in social activities in the home, neighborhood and community. They can also support the Cambodian Association by attending events it sponsors. These events are a vehicle for learning about the Cambodian culture and meeting people. Concerned about the needs of older Cambodians, Na is beginning an effort called "Senior Citizen Ministry" at Fourth Reformed Church.

"For older people, it is a great struggle to learn English," Na said. Na hopes the ministry will help older Cambodians not miss their home country so much. Missing family members is something many Cambodians experience, even if relatives are not across the world but across the United States in another city.

"My people are alone. I am, too. We are far away from our family. But, we have brothers and sisters in Christ. That helps us," he said.



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