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Interview with Pa Sher Yang

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Pa Sher Yang

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Editor: Paul Hillmer

Please tell us your name, what village you were born in, and your mother's and father's names.

My name is Pa Sher Yang, my mother and father are Txiáj Pao Yang. I was born in the village *Nam Mien in Nong Het, Laos.

When you were a child, do you remember what kind of jobs you had in your village? And how did you help your parents?

When I was small, we had already run from the war once before. In 1954, we came to *Seng. At that time I didn't know much because I was still small. The Vietnamese blocked us, so we ran, and then we moved all the family to come live here. In that place I started schooling and the village was called the Valley of Turtles, close to *Bang Nang. Then we stayed in *Chong Cang Thang until 1960 when Kong Le separated. We then stopped schooling, so we ran back home. They were going to attack General Vang Pao at Padong.

Before the war, how did you go to school, and according to America, what grade did you stop at because of the war?

At that time, I was only a young teenage boy. According to America I was only in sixth grade. I wasn't an adult yet. I came home, then the war started and so we ran. The government came to open restaurants, so I went back to school until eighth grade, but my parents were poor and lived far away. There was no one to help me.

When you were in school in Laos, what did you study? And since your parents lived far away, how did you receive food to eat?

During the school session, you had to make one hard pot of rice to eat for a couple of days. There was nothing to go with it, because, for example, they gave you 1,000 [kiep?] while they themselves were poor. That 1,000 is to last one year; your clothes, books, eating, and drinking are all in that 1,000. You may also get help from your older brothers, younger brothers, and other people you know. You stay in school, even though you only get a little food to eat. You make your own food and clothes; you have to find yourself. The hardest thing at that time was when we studied French, and the teachers were French. They only said, "Go buy a book like this in this library. Each of you should bring one so I can teach you." Others had parents who lived close, so they had money so they could go buy books. When you first attended, you saved money and were able to go buy it, but in the middle of the year, your money was gone, then you couldn't buy it, so you didn't know what they were studying. That's something that was very hard. That's how life was in school back then. When we were in school, it wasn't too bad, but it was harder than how your generation learns now, because every year, it didn't matter what you studied, at the end of every year you took a final exam. You had to remember everything before you were able to pass to another class, so if you couldn't remember everything then you had to start again. For us, they taught everything to us, and when the year was over you got only one time to test. Then they put everything together and if you passed everything, only then would you pass. If you weren't truly good, then you couldn't pass. School was very hard at that time, but we were able to pass, so it wasn't too bad. They could make it and so

could you, but the poorest thing was that you didn't have money to buy books to help you study. There was nothing to ride in Vientiane, we only walked.

After you studied, once the war started, what did you do?

Afterwards, I had an older brother, everyone knew his name was Colonel Shoua Yang. He came to K-11 and was near Vietnam.

K means what?

K means sector. He came and saw me. Although I was only in eighth grade, he noticed that I went back and forth to school very poorly so since he needed people to work for him, he said that I should go help him. If there was good fortune, even though I had only finished grade eight, I could be a governor. At that time you don't have much. There was nothing to help you so you decided to come back and live with parents.

At that time, how old were you? And was he your true older brother or just someone with the last name Yang?

An older brother relative. At that time I was close to 17-18 years, just finishing the years of my youth. I believe I came to live with them in year 1963. The Vietnamese came to attack Laos which, in the past, were the nationalists only. At that time the Vietnamese sent their real soldiers to attack us, because they truly wanted to overtake Laos. There were too many of them, and we couldn't protect *Khay Kuno so we separated, and ran from there. At that time I was lost for one month and 15 days, but had good fortune, so I was able to find my way back home. During the time I was lost I was very poor, and there was no food to eat, no water to drink. Sometimes you walk and walk for a day, and there's no water, only rain in some old bull footprints, so you bend to drink it. I talk about hunger, the word hunger everyone knows, but the truth is that not a lot of people know true hunger. I will talk of hunger to you young ones so you can write it down. A person who is hungry, when they eat bananas and can't swallow, that is true hunger, but when he still can eat and swallow, he's not hungry yet. Hunger is like this. If a person still has food in their body, you can eat and swallow because you still have some food in your body, but if you stay for many days and the food in your body disappears, you can't swallow. You can hardly swallow the liquid, but one thing that you can swallow to help your body are *sour leaves*. In your lives in the future, in case you meet hunger, remember this. Anything that tastes sour, you can swallow. Keep eating it, even if it's tough, eat a lot until you are full, but if something is sweet then you can't swallow it. The people I've asked, they don't know hunger, they've only skipped a couple of meals. Then they're hungry normally but they haven't reached real hunger. True hunger, I believe that over all those leader soldiers, only I know.

Before the Vietnamese attacked and you scattered, the American government had given you weapons. What kind of weapons did they give you? How much training did you receive before you were attacked?

When *Pho Nong* scattered, I wasn't a soldier yet. I was only staying with my older brother, being educated. He asked me to help him write papers. I wasn't a soldier and I didn't have name [rank?] to be a soldier and only had a gun, but there was no training at all. After we scattered, and I was lost for one month and 15 days, we settled down in Long Cheng. I then trained to be an intelligence officer in Vientiane for four months. I came back to work in 1964-65.

Please give us an example of how you trained in intelligence.

Intelligence, when they taught us they didn't just teach us a little like in Laos, but they taught us a great deal as if it was America. They wouldn't let you have a bus ticket, but you had to find a way to get messages. It didn't matter what you did, as long as they [the enemy] couldn't catch you or have knowledge of you. But you had to have skill and brains to find the messages. I can't explain this exactly, but in your young lives, if you know you want to study in intelligence, then it is very dangerous. As you are training, they watch over you very well, not allowing you to contact any real problems. But when you've graduated and they've released you, then it becomes your responsibility. You have to use your own knowledge to be successful and not die. The number of people who had gone [out in the field] and been captured were many.

When you had finished your four years of training, what jobs were you given?

After training, they sent me to Long Cheng to interview people who were sort of like spies. I worked there for two years, then came back into Long Cheng in 1968. I then went to Okinawa twice to work.

When you studied in Laos, did you have Thai or Lao teachers? And when you studied in Okinawa did you have American, or what kind of teachers?

In Okinawa it was mainly American or European. There was a European teacher but the rest was American. They spoke only English, and since we didn't know the language, we found an interpreter.

The Americans who came to teach you in intelligence, were they CIA or Special Forces?

The ones who came to teach intelligence were Special Forces, not CIA. They taught that job as if we were in South Vietnam. They didn't know anything about Laos at all.

After your training and your first two years of work, what did you do?

After training for one month and returning, they asked me to go do "OB". It stands for Operation Batter, or something like that. You have to report daily about the locations and numbers of Vietnamese. You had to determine where they came from and what division they were in, how long they had been there, and who their leaders were. If you knew their names, it would be even better.

After obtaining the information, who did you report it to? Was it reported to Hmong, Laotians, or Americans too?

Americans did work with us, but it was all reported back to Laos, because we lived in Laos. There were some [missions] that we handled very well, but still some where we didn't do well. Something very disgusting during that time in war was in the stomach, there were maggots [he means this literally]. The people you trusted most were the ones who reported information back to the Vietnamese. Only now do we know of all this, but before everyone rose from the forest to become leaders so there was no way of catching that sort of thing. After we've scattered away, we found out that the most trusted person reported our information to Vietnamese, and that was the reason they were able to take over Long Cheng.

Who did you did the Vietnamese soldiers to once you had captured and questioned them, after there was no use for them?

At that time we only worked here and there for the Royal [Laotian] Army, so after we had questioned them and there was nothing else to do [with them], we sent them to the Royal army and they would hold on to those prisoners and trade [them] for important people. But the Vietnamese, even if you showed them you had their people, they would deny that the person was one of theirs.

They would say that there were many Vietnamese working for us, and so we just took Vietnamese who were working for us and claimed that they were theirs.

From your experiences fighting against the Vietnamese and the Red [Pathet] Lao, would you say they were tough fighters? Were they smart, or did they only fight because they were forced to fight?

The Vietnamese and Red Lao, I don't know well, but according to what I know from finding messages, the Vietnamese had a leader. Right now, he may already be dead or very old. He is someone that Americans admire. He's more important than the one who won the war in France. He is someone considered to love his land. Americans have this, and the larger countries have this. They have a chart in which they measure how wide your forehead is, how your eyes look, how long your chin is, and what your arms and legs look like. They measure you and if you're not their people, they know. The most important thing is that you were born in this country, then they'll know that you are a person who loves the land. When you go into training, although there are many, when you finish they already give you captain. Six months after that they raise you automatically to a general while you are still at the age of 25-28. If you see generals who are very young, that is why. The ones who are old have slowly achieved their positions. That general had great character; he helped the land of Vietnam a lot. He's a general who, when he sends out his soldiers, he would stand by the exit, pat each soldier's head and say, 'you go and be victorious.' Then every Vietnamese soldier—they weren't better than us in any way, but they were encouraged through the words, 'go and be victorious.' So one *cong-pa* will attack only one of their men, because they were really tough. They didn't know much, they were very young, but all they knew were the words 'go and be victorious.' So they felt as if they had to accomplish that order. But in the battles at that time, many, many Vietnamese died—no lie. Even though there weren't many deaths from combat fighting and guns, we killed lots of Vietnamese with airplanes. You couldn't count the bodies, but in many divisions every single soldier died, sometimes leaving only a couple to return back. If Americans didn't lose the battle, if Kissinger didn't go negotiate with the Red Lao, then maybe the war would have only lasted for one or two more years, and we would have won, because they didn't have any more people. They had good fortune, though. When I say good fortune I mean that they lived on the land, that even though all their people died, they still seemed strong. So in the future, you have to carefully watch where you live.

How many years were you a soldier before you moved to Thailand? And when you fled, how was your journey to Thailand?

[I was a soldier] from 1964 to 1975, so all together, about 11 years I was a soldier. In those years I was attacked by Vietnamese many times.

Were you wounded?

I didn't get hurt. I must have had very good fortune, because if you are a righteous person, no matter how much they shoot at you, you'll be able to outrun it. So you have to be a righteous person so god won't let you die, because you still have work to do. But if you are a bad person then you'll get shot. But during that time, when we crossed to Thailand, I didn't come with them by plane because we believed we were still young and wouldn't know how to find food when we got here. So we stayed, and allowed the governors to all come first. The rules became stricter and the time shortened. It must have been good fortune that I was able to lie and pass over. I went from place to place and used different transportations. At that time Thais weren't too bad because we just started coming over in 1975.

At that time were you already married?

At that time, I was married. I already had three children.

Then you and your wife and three kids came?

I came by myself; my two older children had already come over with their grandparents. My wife and youngest boy then came after me, because we couldn't all come together.

Who did they come with?

They came by themselves in a rented car. It was very risky, but they had good fortune because there was no one who caused problems. You younger ones have heard of how the Lao and the Thai have hurt people along the way, but I believe in righteousness, that if you haven't done anything wrong to anyone then the people who create wrongs won't cross your path. But if you do wrongs to people then that wrong will wait by the road for you. Wherever you go, you will not escape.

So when you reached Thailand, you, your wife and children, where did you stay? Did you stay in Vinai?

We must have had good fortune; all the family members were transported by Thai to *Namphong. After that they stopped transporting people. They allowed the ones at the end to stay in *suqhui*. We stayed in *Namphong for about four or five months—it's been a long time. I don't remember well. Then we came to live in Vinai. In *Namphong we were very poor because we stayed inside a wired fence. They wouldn't let us leave, so it was hard to find food and there was nothing to eat, not even a bag of noodles. Even if you had money, you couldn't buy any. The Thai soldiers were cruel, but when we reached Vinai, they gave us fewer boundaries, and we were the first there, so they allowed us to go find food as we desired, as long as it was a short distance and we went by foot and came back, and not by car. I stayed in Vinai for three years before I could come to this country.

In Vinai, did you work or help Hmong in any way?

In Vinai, you had to help because although we lived like that, we were afraid of the Thai and so at night time we rounded up the young boys to keep watch. (170 min)

Did they have weapons or carry anything?

They had nothing, but made signal noises, because I was already trained, so I taught signal noises to everyone. It's not yelling or calling but it's an odd noise, but every night we changed to a different noise. By doing that we were able to help each other, because sometimes the Thai came, but when the noise was made everyone rose together so Thai couldn't do anything bad to us.

Why would the Thai come? What were their reasons? Did they want money? What kind of damage might they have caused?

As I see it, since we ran from a war, first they wanted to get girlfriends; that was the main reason. The second reason was wanting to rape young women, and the third was to steal money. But although we didn't have weapons we were well prepared. We didn't have any problems, but after I left, there was problems. But since I wasn't there, I don't know about it.

When you were in Vinai, did you have any relatives who sent you money?

We had no one, but after being there for one or two years, my two younger brothers were still bachelors. At that time they transported young men with no parents, so we signed them up so they were able to come to this country. I'll always remember how the fact that the family wasn't separated gave you peace. Being separated makes you heartbroken because this land, no one had

been here [yet], all we knew was that it went past the horizon. We didn't know if there were people or demons on the other side. But if you stayed, you had no idea how to find food or how your life would end. So when separated we never thought to see each other again, because the person who left would never come back and you would never be able to visit them. In truth, you missed them more, your heart hurt and burned more than if the person died, because when they're dead, you see that their body is decaying, but when they leave and are still alive, you miss them more.

What year did you come to America and when you arrived, where did you land? In the first year, what did you think of America?

The first year we landed in Chicago. That year was 1978, in September. But Chicago was a big city with many people. When you wake up in the morning you see people waiting for buses and trains to take them to work. It didn't matter if you were a woman or man, after seeing all that we thought, 'I can't live in this country,' because our minds were small and we wouldn't know how to find food. I had a relative in Minnesota. He landed here and his wife is a sister of my wife. He was also a Yang. He told us that over here is still less advanced, there are many [opportunities for] vocational training, and that we should come visit to see if we like it. There were many schools with vocational training and even the small colleges had it. We stayed in Chicago for about eight or nine months, then we moved up here. My life in this country was hard, but then I went through vocational training for 18 months. I finished on a Friday and only rested on Saturday and Sunday. Before that the first company I worked at was called Noctronics. I heard that they were hiring; they made chips that you put in stereos where the film touches and it speaks. And they made the tops of the Apollo [rockets] that are shot to the moon. Those were all created from Noctronics. Many of my friends applied, but they didn't accept them. I then decided to try, and when I took in my application they asked me when I could start. I told them I wasn't finished with school yet, and he asked for the day I'd be done. I didn't remember the date, but I was done on a Friday and so he told me start work on [the following] Monday. Then I only rested for two days, and in all my life I haven't rested in this country.

So when did you decide you wanted to open a store? And for what reason?

In your life you have to move. I worked for Noctronics for seven or eight years, and at first I saw that I received money all right. When I started I was paid \$6.25 per hour. But as I worked on longer I was raised to 13, 14 dollars, and I thought that since I was paid more I would have more money saved, but no. Then we thought that if my wife worked we would have more money saved, but we didn't. In one year we can't even save 20 dollars. There's too much stress and you're someone everyone knows. At that time Vinai was still there, in France there is poverty. They are also able to communicate with Laos, and so everyone is asking for money. Since you give money everywhere you don't have money left every year. Then I thought, by working at a company you only have enough to eat; maybe you will never have money in your life. Because of this, you have to find something else to do. Then I thought that maybe we had to go into business. But business is easy to talk about. When you actually do it, it is hard. Everything you do is based on fortune. When you are born, the day of your birth is the most important date. You have to go back and look, since you youths know your birth date, you should go back and look at it to see what you can be successful in. Some people will be successful in business, some people have to work in order to be successful. We each have our own roles, we have our own jobs. Don't think that when you see someone else accomplishing something, you can go do it too. You can't do it because you can't do what they can. But if you see someone try something and fail, don't lose heart that you will fail either. Sometimes, like cars, all you have to do is screw it a little and it will work. So in business, we elders don't know our birth dates; our parents can only tell us that we were born during the time of

harvest or little details like that, so you don't know the true date. But since you youths know your birth date, before you choose a career you have to look at your birth date to see what you can do to be successful. (235 min)

Thank you for your words of wisdom. Is there anything else you want to say to the youths who in 10 or more years will listen to your words? What do you want to say to them?

For the young ones in the future, I want to say, as human beings we Hmong know how to love at times and not at times. Only the elders aren't educated and so they want what sounds right for them, but both you young men and young women are educated. You've seen that the sky is high and wide. You have to change your attitudes, have an open heart. When you speak, speak slowly. Don't be false about what you say, but be real with a pure heart to the heavens to show your family and friends that you are an honest person. It's easier for you young men and women to work, for me, before I can receive money, my back aches and whether I sleep or wake my body is heavy. But you have to try in order to accomplish anything. The elders like us are getting older, the name and life of the Hmong is in your hands. You have to encourage each other with a big heart. Don't bring each other down. From now on, you shouldn't discriminate against each other by last names anymore. The only reason we've focused on this before was to not marry into one's own last name, but you shouldn't look down on others because of their last name, either. Whatever last name they have, we are all the same. This generation says that Hmong means Free Man, but I don't translate it that way. Our ancestors have given us a great name, the name Hmong means that we are of one family. Why do I say this? Because maybe you're a Yang and I'm a Vang, but as we discuss back in our family tree we will find that we are related. So whatever last name, we are of one family. So if you all can see that we are just one family, the Hmong will be known. When the Americans reach China and meet Hmong they say, 'oh, you have relatives in America too.' When they reach France and meet Hmong they say, "h, you have relatives in China too.' That is a great thing. We are Freedom and Free Men, we are Family. And I want you all to know that.

Thank you for giving your time to share with us your words of wisdom.

If there is more that you need, because I haven't spoken thoroughly on combat in Vietnam, so anytime you need to know more, come talk to me.