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Interview with Poj Noj Her

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Interview Poj Noj Her

**Interviewer: Peter Chou Vang
Translator/Transcriber: Peter Chou Vang
Editor: Paul Hillmer**

Can you tell me your name and your parent's names?

My name is Txiah from the Her Clan. My mother name is Sia from the Yang Clan. My father's name is *Ga Noj, from the Her Clan. (0:18 sec)

Can you tell me where you were born and raised?

I was born and raised in *Moung Chia. My parents were also born and raised in *Moung Chia. (0:30 sec)

When you were a little child growing up, what did you do around the house?

The older folks took up to work on the garden and farm. (0:41)

Can you explain to me some of your chores that you did while growing up?

As soon as we knew how to dress ourselves, our parents took us to go farm with them. We woke up early to get the fire going to cook breakfast. After we finished breakfast, we packed our lunch in baskets (called *Ker) and headed off to farm. [Hmong traditional farms are located quite a distance away from the village so their livestock cannot eat and ruin the harvest.] We farmed until five in the afternoon before coming back to the village. (1:25)

What were the types of food available for your family to eat in Laos? Was it nutritious and filling?

It was poor quality food, but we are Hmong and we are used to it. We also raised some chicken and pigs to supplement the vegetables and rice and corn. (1:56)

I know that in Laos meat is scarce. In how many meals per week did you get to eat meat?

I think out of a week there was probably about two or three meals that have meat. There wasn't a lot. (2:13)

What type of meat?

We ate mostly chicken and pork. (2:18)

What about for the New Year celebration? What did your family eat for the celebration? Also, what was the role that teenage girls played in the New Year celebration?

In Laos, it was a tradition set by our ancestors to have the New Year celebration on the 1st of December. It was taboo on that day for us to use money or to buy anything. Also, during that day it was the beginning of the New Year and we all dressed in our best traditional clothes. All the teenagers would go out to intermingle and have a courtship ball-tossing game. The young men would form a line and the young women would form another line parallel to them.

What was in that ball?

We used old cloths and made tossing balls out of them. We then use a new cloth as the cover for it. (3:38)

How were young women for the New Year celebration in the old days dressed up?

Back then we were very simple and we didn't know how to dress up. There was really nothing to wear.

Was there any makeup?

There was no makeup at all. We just wrapped red and green cloths around our waists, put on our traditional clothes on top of our cloths and then wore our cap. We just went to the village square to have fun. (4:08)

The red and green clothes that you wore—did you buy or make those?

We would buy them from the Chinese or Laotian traders.

What did you use to barter for it?

Since we were farmers we would trade our chickens and pigs for it. Also, we would sell a portion of our rice and corn harvest to the poor for cash and would use the cash to buy the clothes. (4:50)

How many new types of clothing did you get per year?

For the New Year celebration, each person got at least one new set of clothing during the 1st of December. [It is a Hmong tradition to celebrate the New Year.]

Both men and women received new clothing?

Yes, both sexes received new clothing. (5:12)

What about the necklaces? Were they real silver?

Yes they were real genuine silver [she said this with great emphasis.] These necklaces were made from wedding silver gifts that were presented to the newlyweds during their marriage.

When you were growing up, were there still silversmiths who were producing these silver necklaces in your village?

They still did. (5:31)

Was the silversmith highly respected among the villagers?

We respected him because he was the only one who could make these necklaces for our sons and daughters to wear. (5:46)

Did you pay the silversmith cash in return for his service or did you barter with him?

Since he spent most of his time in his workshop and had no time to farm, we would trade a portion of our harvest or some livestock for his services.

Did you have to provide the silver?

Yes, we gave him the silver and he'd process the silver and work on it.

Where did you get the silver? Was it passed on to you from your parents and grandparents?

Some silver was passed down to us from our parents and grandparents. Another way was to trade a portion of our harvest with the Chinese or Laotian merchants. (6:51)

How long did it take a silversmith to make one silver necklace?

It took about a month for the silversmith to make one. (7:04)

A silversmith could make about 12 silver necklaces per year?

Yes, something like that. (7:07)

In Laos, how old were you before you were married?

In Laos, I don't quite remember but I think I was about 20 years old before I was married. (7:24)

Before getting married, did you get a chance to go to school?

No, I did not. (7:30)

When you were married, was the wedding ceremony different from today's Hmong weddings?

It was similar to today's weddings. (7:40)

Were you a Christian or did you still believe in the traditional ways when you were married?

We still kept the traditional way. The difference between weddings in the Laos and today is that there weren't any Christian weddings back then. (7:48)

When the Vietnamese came to your village, did you have any children yet?

[She confused about the question.] We didn't have any children yet. We were newly wed and my husband was already a soldier fighting the Vietnamese. After the war was over (1975) my husband came back. We did have two children before we came over to the US. (8:278)

When your husband was in the military, what were some of the hardest troubles for you living back in the village? Did General Vang Pao and the Americans give you any aid?

When my husband went to war I didn't have any children yet, so I still lived with my parents. [When PN had children, it was a Hmong custom for her to live with the in-laws.] Whatever my parents had they shared with me. Whenever my husband came back from the war, we would live on his monthly military pay. I would use his pay to buy food for the family to eat.

Was is it hard for you to live like this? Was it harder than before the war?

Before the war, life was good. There wasn't a lot of hardship.

Did the Americans supply your family with anything?

They did provide some but your husband had to be a soldier for you to receive anything. If you didn't have a son or a husband in the military then it was very hard for you. (9:59)

The Americans knew which ones were in the military to provide for his family?

Yes, only those with registered names were allowed any aid from the American. (10:04)

Did they drop rice for your village?

Yes, they did. (10:16)

How long did you live on supplies from the Americans during the course of the war?

We lived like that for [four or five seconds to think about how long they lived on the American's aid] about six or seven years. (10:43)

When your husband was captured by the Vietnamese in 1977 or '78, were you scared? What was going through your mind? Where were you during this time?

During that time, all the men were arrested and only the women and children were left.

The Vietnamese deported us to *Moung Het in Vietnam. We were really wrenched at that time. [Both were confused about *Moung Het and were discussing about it.]

*Moung Het was inside Vietnam, but it was close to the Laotian border. It was near the big city [Hanoi] that all the [Vietnamese] political leaders lived. We lived there for one year and we lived in a wretched condition. We didn't hear any news about our husbands and loved ones, not knowing if they were dead or alive. Finally we were able to get permission and documentation to travel six days to *Phon Savah. (11:37)

Wow, that was far! Did you have any children at that time?

At that time I had three children. (11:42)

During the time when your husband was put in prison for three years, did you get any news that he was alive?

The first year there was no news, but the second and third years there was some news that he was alive. (11:59)

Who was the one who sent the letters notifying you that your husband was still alive?

We had some relatives who lived near the prison camp. They told me that my husband's and his brother's names were on the prison roster. We heard the news through word of mouth from Hmong who came over to us while we were still living in Vietnam. (12:29)

During those three years, what was the situation like for you?

I was very pitiful and wretched. If I speak more on this matter, I can talk on forever about it. I was in a very bad situation. My three children were still very young.

Who did you live with during this time?

My husband's parents have already gone [to Thailand] so I stayed with my husband's older brother's wife. We shared a house together.

Did you have anyone else living with you?

There was *Hla Joua Khoua, our older brother, but he lived in his own house. (13:06)

Can you tell me how much suffering you went through?

When they were in prison camp we were in such a terrible state [emphasis greatly on how bad their condition was in the tone of her voice]. All we could do was cry because there was nothing else to do. After not hearing from them for a year we thought they [her husband and his older brother] were both dead. When we were detained in Vietnam, we cried daily. We constantly prayed every day for their lives and to hear from them again. We prayed continuously even though we didn't know about God at this time. After some time, our relatives from the village of *Pho Luj told us the news that my husband and his older brother were alive. That's when we decided to get passage documents from the authority there to allow us to travel back to *Phon Savah. There, for the first time, we heard concrete news that they were alive. When they were in prison, we suffered heavily and so did our children. When we were deported [to *Noj Het, Vietnam] there was no one to provide food for us and it was very hard. The only thing we had was our lives. Our six day trek back was difficult, because there was no one to guide us and show us the way. Knowing no one, we just made our way over. When it got dark, we would beg Hmong families for places to stay for the night.

Just the two of you women?

Yes, on our way back, I was the one who led the way, and it was like that. (14:41)

How did you manage to survive without your husband for three years? [In the Hmong traditional culture the man provides for everything while the woman works in the home and at the farm. It was hard to not have a husband there to bring in the income.] Did anyone help provide for you and your family?

We had nothing to eat. I had some of my husband's saved military pay and I used this to buy food from the Hmong along the way. Close relatives also gave us some food to eat. That was basically it. After this we were deported to Vietnam. We were registered for food and lived like that for a year. (15:16)

Did the Vietnamese know that you were the wife of a soldier who fought against them?

Yes, they did. (15:24)

Did the Vietnamese do any harm to you or your family?

They didn't torture us, but they relocated us and that was already hard enough. They put my husband in a prison camp and they deported us to Vietnam so we couldn't escape.

In Vietnam, were you allowed to travel around?

We were under house arrest and were not allowed to go anywhere. When it was time to give us food they brought it to us. Only then were we able to go out of our designated place to carry the food back to our house. (16:07)

Was there enough to eat?

There was enough to eat so we wouldn't starve. It was very hard. (16:13)

Were there any relatives that could help your family?

No, there were none. (16:18)

When your husband was released and your family decided to escape to Thailand, how did you escape? Was it an illegal act at that time to try to escape?

After my husband was released, we lived with my relatives for a while. One of my uncles worked for the Vietnamese and through him we were able to get documents to move down to *Na Nyob. That's how we escape to Thailand. (16:18)

Did you lose anyone close to you because of the war or the aftermath of the war?

I lost many. I had many relatives who were killed, but all of my siblings made it. One of my uncles lost his leg to an anti-personnel landmine, but he didn't die. He's living in the US today. (17:56)

[Track 2 ends here and continues into Track 3

Was Thailand a harsh place for you and your family? How many children did you have when you were in Thailand?

While we were in Thailand I had four children.

Was Thailand hard for your family?

Thailand was better than living in Laos. (0:25)

Did the Thais mistreat your family in any way?

Yes, the Thais were mistreating us and we couldn't move out of the refugee camps at all. Wherever they wanted us to stay, we had to stay there. There was no other place for us to go. We were relieved that there were no Vietnamese trying to kill us, but we were not allowed to go outside of the refugee camps. If we did, then we were beaten. We were very scared and tried to do whatever they said. (0:54)

[In the Thailand Refugee Camp] what were some ways of creating income within the camp? Did any of your relatives who had come over to the US send your family anything?

We came late to the Thai refugee camp; we couldn't get registered in time because my husband was in prison. When we arrived to Thailand, the deadline for incoming refugee processing was over. We had to live for one year in *Vinine in a wretched situation. I had to make embroidering for cash, but we had to beg relatives for the needles, yarn and materials. After I completed the embroidering, we sent them over to my relatives in the

US to sell. We used the money from the embroidering to buy food to eat in *Ban Vinine. (1:41)

Your relatives in the US—did they also give you additional cash?

Yes, they did. (1:48)

In Thailand, because of the overcrowded Hmong refugee population, were there diseases and pollution going around? Did you know any relatives, especially young infants, who were sick due to these situations?

When we were there, there were many sickness. It was really crowded and the water wasn't sanitary. There was many dirty rotten things in the water. In *Vinine, there were a lot of death. My family was doing fine but many of our relatives died in the refugee camp.

So there is no death in your immediate family?

No there wasn't. (2:33)

In the refugee camp, because you had four children, did you get additional help from the Thai or American government?

In *Vinine we weren't registered, so we got whatever we could beg from our relatives or money from our relatives living in the US already. The children didn't receive anything. (3:04)

How long did your family stay in Thailand before being registered into the refugee camp?

We stayed in *Vinine for two years, then we moved to *San Khan and lived there for six months. After that, we moved to *Panane Koung. (3:16)

Were you and your family registered at all in the refugee camps?

We were registered by the Thais in *San Khan. It was also there that we were able to come over to the US. (3:37)

Were only ex-soldiers and their families allowed to register?

Yes, it was like that. Only ex-soldiers and their families were allowed to register. Once we were registered we were given food and cooking supplies. (3:58)

When your family first arrived in Thailand, why was your family unable to register? After all, your husband was an ex-soldier.

We came too late and the deadline for closing the camp had passed already.

The deadline was over?

Yes, they didn't allow any more registering. The latecomers were illegally living in the camps. (4:22)

How long did your family stay in *Pana Nekong before coming to the US?

We stayed in *Pana Nekong for about six months. (4:29)

Once your family was registered, was it easier to live there?

Yes, that's correct. Once we arrived in *San Kang, they found out that my husband was an ex-soldier and they allowed us to register. This is when they distributed food and other supplies for us. We stayed there for three months before being taken to *Pana Nekong. We stayed in *Pana Nekong for six months and during that time we were given food and other supplies as well. (5:04)

How much food was distributed to your family in *Pana Nekong? Can you go into detail about how much food was distributed on a regular week?

They would distribute food twice every week.

How much rice per person?

One person received two bowls full of rice. [PN cupping her hands together to indicate how big the bowl was.]

Everybody was given the same amount?

Yes, that's correct. They also distributed meat, vegetables and firewood twice per week. (5:47)

Was some of the food that was distributed spoiled due to the heat and environment you and your family were in?

We were too starving to complain. There was nothing else to eat. The meat and vegetables were all bad. They were old and bad but there was nothing we could do. What we couldn't eat we threw away. (6:14)

Before arriving in the US, what was your impression about the US?

We thought that it was a better place where we would be able find enough to eat and a safe place for us to live. (6:39)

Was your impression of America different after you lived here for a while?

There were some differences. It's a better place, but due we couldn't speak the English language or make sense of the culture, so it was hard for us to look for food to eat. When we first arrived, they gave us money to buy food and pay for our rent [welfare]. Once we had to work, it was another matter. We didn't know how to do anything and it was very stressful. (7:29)

How long was your family on welfare before working?

We lived on welfare in California until 1998 before we started to work. (7:46)

Your family came in 1987?

We came on April 10th 1987. (7:50)

All together, how many people are in your family?

There are eight total in our family. [She meant eight children—10 total in their family].

What are their names?

The oldest child is Paj Vang [female], next is *Shoua Vang [male], the third one is Tou Vang [male], the fourth one is Seng, the fifth one is *Txong [female], the sixth one is *Ong, the seventh is Steve and the eighth is Tony. (8:25)

Do you think your children who were born in the US are different from you?

They are different from us.

Is it a good or a bad thing?

It's a good thing, but our ways and habits are different. If we follow our traditional way, then our children will not understand. We don't understand their American ways and we don't like it, either. (8:58)

Would you like to say something to Hmong students who will be listening to your message ten or so years down the road? What does it mean to be Hmong?

I would like to say to all the American-Hmong youth, male or female, that when we lived in the old world we were poor, but we listened to our parents and we matured really fast. We weren't so poor that we had to beg others for help. Although we weren't educated, we were able to go out and provide for ourselves. Here in the US, it's not the strength that will win the day, it is education. Now it's the mind and the pencil that will win bread on the table. I would like to see our children work hard in school so they can help the elders when they are successful. Even though the youth don't understand our traditional ways, I hope they will understand that because they are Hmong they must work hard and listen to their parents' words. I want to see an understanding between the old and the young. This is all I have to say. (10:46)

Do you have anything else to say?

Yes, I have too much on my mind to say. (10:54)

Do you consider the next generation of Hmong born here in the US too Americanized?

I believe if the next generation doesn't keep our ways, then they will not understand our heritage and culture. They won't know our history, our food, our traditional clothing and the way we brought up our children. Our old way of life in Laos will be lost. (11:45)

Are you afraid that they will let go of our culture and embrace American culture?

We are afraid that they will marry other races or ethnic groups that will not respect our old way and traditions. We are worried about this. We're afraid, so that is why we want the young Hmong generation that grew up in Thailand but was raised here to teach their American-born counterparts to appreciate our culture. When our traditions and culture disappear, we will become a pitiful race and will fall behind others. Other races and ethnic groups will consider us unimportant. (12:27)

Would you like the American government or a Hmong organization to create something for the Hmong to remember their history and the values of the Hmong culture?

Other nations have programs set up for them, I wish the Hmong to have the same so we are remembered. This is what I want the government to do. (12:56)

Do you have anything else to say?

Yes, I do have some more to say. (13:04)

I know that the US is very different from Laos. Even if you were younger and you were allowed to go back and settle in Laos, would you do it?

I do believe that if we could go back, we would. If we want to be an important race we must come together. Here in the US, we are mingled into a large, diverse group and we are losing our traditions and heritage. Back in Laos, we took care of each other no matter who you were. As long as you were Hmong, you were taken care of by your people because you shared the same common culture and identity. Even though we were worse off and had less than here in the US, we had great love in our community. Even if you killed a chicken, a pig or an ox, you invited the whole village to come and enjoy it with you. Here in the US, we have lost this important value of our culture. We don't see each other and have lost so many of our cultural values. Back in Laos, before the New Year, we would kill a pig, an ox or a water buffalo and invite the whole village to eat with us for a whole day. (14:43)

Would you be able to trade the comforts of the US to go back to Laos—comforts such as electricity and vehicles? Could you live without these things?

I believe that if Laos was peaceful again like it was before the war, then I would be willing to sacrifice all those comforts to go back. [Peter clarifies the question.]

We were a lot happier there than here.

You would rather walk than take a car?

Yes, I would rather walk. It was fun and peaceful. There were no worries. Over in Laos, your brain didn't hurt like here. If we didn't have electricity, we could always build camp fires like in the old days. We didn't argue and have divorces like here in the US. If we were young, we wouldn't regret going back to Laos and starting our life again.

(16:04)

Do you have anything more to say about Laos; something that I might have missed?

Back in Laos, even if our children were 18 years old or older, they still gave much respect to the parents and elders. We as daughters listened to our parents without arguing back. We weren't like the generation here in the US. We lived very differently. In Laos, once there was sunlight in the morning, around 3 or 4 a.m., the girls were up to make breakfast for the day. Here in the US, our children are very different from us when we were young. If we were younger, we could perform the tasks that we used to do back in Laos. This is something good that we must remember about our past even if we live here in the US. We must follow the culture of this land, but we must also keep some of ours so that our people will not disappear. (17:11)

Thank You