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READER
Friday, December 9, 1988 Vol. 11, No. 8 LOS ANGELES'S FREE WEEKLY

Mrs. Noup's Life Before Donuts

Schoolteacher in Phnom Penh, Slave in the Killing Fields, Refugee in a Teeming Thai Camp, but Always a Mother With an American Dream

By Al Santoli

Celia Noup's claim to the American dream is a four-table donut shop near a busy fre way entrance on a wide boulevard that links Los Angeles International Airport to infinity of gas stations, pizza shops, hair and nail salons, video-rental spots, one-hour pho marts, and clusters of boxlike tract homes.

A quick right turn onto Manhattan Beach Boulevard leads to ocean-front condominiums. A left turn traverses the Latin barrios and black ghettos of Compton and Watts. Mrs. Noup's little piece of Hawthorne Boulevard, in the Lawndale community, is part of Los Angeles's urban sprawl that grew with the post-World War II highway boom, a place where newlywed returning GIs could afford their first homes with pleasant green lawns in "Ozzie and Harriet" neighborhoods.

Celia Noup

photos for the Reader by Andrew Taylor

In recent years, faces on the street reflect the jambalaya of peoples who have migrated to Southern California from every conceivable spot on the globe. Celia Noup, age fifty, and her daughters are among the fifty thousand Cambodians who have settled in Los Angeles and Orange counties. They are survivors of a holocaust that has consumed nearly one-third of Cambodia's population.

In 1975, after the black pajama-clad Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, a stream of zombielike fugitives began straggling into Thailand with tales of unbelievable slaughter and massive slave-labor camps. At the time Indochina fell,

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around a hundred Cambodians were living in the United States. Most were diplomats or college students. In the next few years, they were joined by around two thousand refugees related to government and military officials.

In 1979, Vietnam invaded Cambodia, pushing more than a half-million emaciated refugees into barbed-wire enclosed camps along the Thailand frontier. The United States responded with a resettlement program primarily for those who had suffered because of previous association with Americans, and their surviving family members.

The first group of refugees, who were well educated, adapted their professional talents. But new arrivals, less familiar with Western society and overwhelmed by American language and culture, have floundered. Many were placed in the worst slums of New York, Providence, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and other large cities. Finding few job opportunities and living in constant fear of robbery or beatings, they began migrating to the Pacific Coast's more promising job market and social-welfare programs. With family members arriving from overseas refugee camps, California has become home for half of the 150,000 Cambodians in America.

Although they have found a sympathetic environment, most Cambodians—especially adults plagued with language problems—are limited to unskilled jobs that pay less than public assistance. The welfare system has discouraged parents of young children from starting jobs at base pay by revoking medical benefits from families of the working poor. Having suffered the loss of their country and witnessed relatives perish during four bloody years of the Khmer Rouge, and then experienced the subsequent hardships of living in refugee camps and being thrust into an alien new world, many Cambodians have given up on life.

Unlike other Asians, who have aggressively entered the American marketplace, Cambodians have never possessed exceptional business skills. Theirs was largely a village-based farming society; the small educated elite worked in government, administrative, or military professions. Most commerce was conducted by ethnic Chinese merchants and some Vietnamese traders. To survive in America, however, a growing number of Cambodians are learning to open small businesses.

Celia Noup, a high school teacher in Phnom Penh, was widowed by the Khmer Rouge during the years of terror. She arrived in America on July 4, 1979, determined to hold her family together without taking assistance from outsiders. When she speaks of her husband, her eyes involuntarily fill with tears. But she has never asked anyone for pity.

Six or seven days a week, from before the morning rush begins on the San Diego Freeway until after the second shift has left the local aircraft factories, Celia works behind the counter of her shop. She moves slowly on aching legs that cause her to see a doctor once a week for an injection to numb the pain. With a resigned lilt in her voice, she described her American dream.

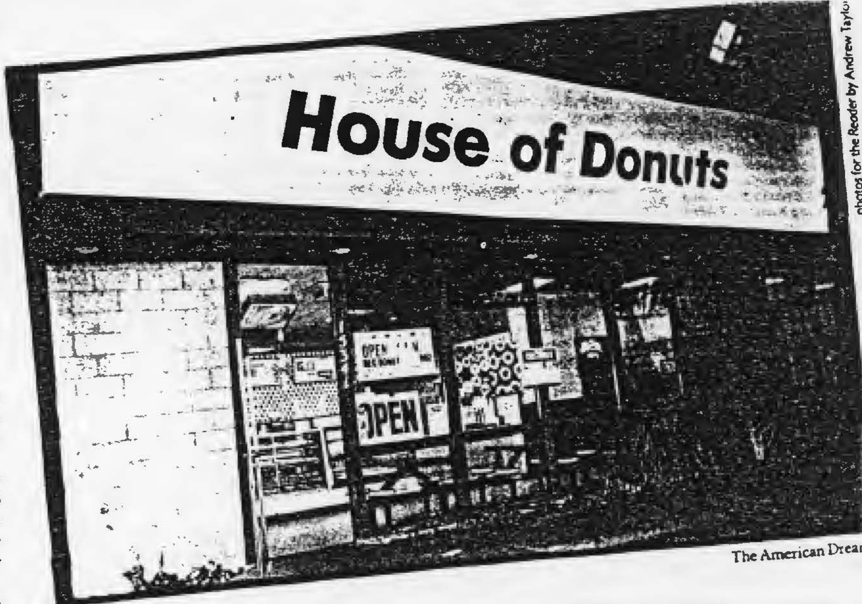
I started this business from almost nothing at all. I named it House of Donuts, my own franchise. I spend most of my time in this shop, seven days a week. Why did a woman my age choose this kind of business? I know it's crazy. My children were already living in Southern California. And my second daughter, Monie, was getting married here. That's why I moved here from Washington, D.C., in 1983.

I get to the shop at 5:00 in the morning to open for breakfast, and I usually leave around 7 p.m. I work behind the counter, serving customers, and do the cleaning and sweeping. I work by myself most of the time. My youngest daughter, Parika, just began college, but she comes with me at 5 a.m. to help. At 10 a.m., she goes home to study, before she attends afternoon and evening classes at El Camino College. She works another part-time job, at May Company, in the children's department. She wants to buy a car.

I am pursuing the American dream—to have a house of my own, for my family. I try to make my children understand: "You have to help me in the shop, so that I can save and buy a small house." But they have their own lives, their own families, other jobs. The money they earn is not that much. So they still need me as much as I need them.

When I became an American citizen a few months ago, it was very emotional for me. I was happy that I could be part of my new country. I do feel loyalty to the United States. I think of myself as both Cambodian and an American citizen. I cannot forget where I came from.

My maiden name was Thann Meng Vann. When I became an American citizen, I took an American name, Celia, and my husband's family name, Noup, because I hope that he will some day return. I lost contact with him as our country was falling in April 1975. The outpost he commanded was surrounded by the Khmer Rouge. I have never found out what happened to him after he was captured. Sometimes I have seen him in my dreams, but he never talks to me.



photos for the Reader by Andrew Taylo

The American Drear

'I lost contact with my husband as our country was falling in 1975. I have never found out what happened to him after he was captured. Sometimes I see him in my dreams, but he never talks to me.'

On weekdays, I live in the house that my first daughter Mealy [pronounced May-lee] and her husband rent; it is only five minutes from my shop. On weekends, I live with my daughter Monie and her husband, in Torrance. I share the cost of food for the households. Sometimes I buy groceries. And I pay some rent for both Parika and me. I try to help my children as much as I can. I can't take it all with me.

I have four grandchildren, all babies—two years, one year, and a few months. The only time I have for them is on weekends, when my daughters are working at my shop. I babysit the kids while I do bookkeeping. I enjoy their company.

When I was growing up in Phnom Penh, my father was the principal of a primary school. My grandfather worked in the Royal Palace; he was chief cook for the King. And my father's sister was one of King Monivong's concubines.

I fulfilled my father's dreams of a college education at the Cambodia Institute of Faculty. I also studied in the United States for six months, in Michigan. I went back to Phnom Penh to finish my degree. Then, for twenty-two years, I taught at the Khmera-Anglais High School. It was the only high school in Cambodia that taught English as a second language.

My husband, Noup Paramoun, was a soldier since 1954, when Cambodia gained its independence from France. We were married in 1955 and lived in Phnom Penh.

Cambodia became directly involved in the [Indochina] War after Prince Sihanouk was overthrown in March 1970. The North Vietnamese started pushing deeper into Cambodia, toward Phnom Penh, from the border sanctuaries that Sihanouk had given them earlier. In September 1970, my husband was still a major when he was made commander of Battalion 24 and sent to Svay Rieng Province. That was the first time we left Phnom Penh.

Svay Rieng was a dangerous area on the South Vietnam border, only fifty miles from Phnom Penh. Its capital, Svay Rieng city, is just a few miles from the "Parrot's Beak" area of Cambodia, which juts into Vietnam. The Vietnamese Communists launched attacks into Saigon from these bases.

My husband never liked to talk much about his work, but he told me about one battle at a bridge that his men had to defend for three nights and days. They didn't eat anything during that whole time. After that, he was ordered to another hot area, in Kompong Cham Province.

During the third year of the war, in 1973, the American army left Vietnam. The Cambodian government told my husband, "You've been fighting for three years. Let's find a better place for your people, Battalion 24." So the battalion cut some lumber from the forest and built a base camp outside of Phnom Penh, near Pochentong Airport. Needless to say, I was overjoyed to have my husband home again.

They had hardly settled in when Svay Rieng almost fell to the Communists. All that remained was a small five-kilometer area. Battalion 24 had to be airlifted to rescue the city from the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese Communists.

When the battle was finished, my husband came back to Phnom Penh to visit army headquarters. After the meeting, he came home very upset. He said, "Honey, they asked me to be governor of Svay Rieng." I said, "What will you do there? You have no education to be a politician. You have been a soldier all your life. You are a tough fighter, but not a governor." He said, "I have to give General Sak Sutsakhan an answer this afternoon."

General Sak told Paramoun, "Svay Rieng is your native area. Your father was a teacher there. I cannot find anybody more qualified to save the province at this moment. I promise, if I can find someone who wants the job, I will relieve you."

I stayed in Phnom Penh with our daughters. My husband was so proud of the four girls. When he was promoted to general, our garden was full of guests. He introduced the girls to all of them. He said, "Here are my girls: Melay, Monie, Romani, and the youngest is Parika."

In the spring of 1975, as the country was falling, Paramoun came into the city only for brief meetings and to lobby at army headquarters for ammunition. As soon as he finished his business, he went right back to his command. We didn't have a family life.

On April 14, the Khmer Rouge were tightening their siege around Phnom Penh. That day, Cambodia's president, Lon Nol, fled the country. For the first time ever, I decided to telephone my husband in Svay Rieng. He told me, "You should leave the country with the kids and your parents. I cannot go with you. The soldiers here have asked me to fight with them until the end." Those were the last words I ever heard from him.

On the morning of April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge marched into the city, dressed in black. People were clapping their hands and waving white flags, shouting, "Peace, peace." Young Khmer Rouge soldiers, eight or ten years old, were dragging their rifles, which were taller than them. I remember thinking, "They are so young. And we surrendered to *them*?" I didn't see a tank or jeep, just people in black.

The whole city, more than two million people, was forced out of their homes into the streets. My family walked with our neighbors until we reached Mao Tse-tung Boulevard, the main boulevard in Phnom Penh. All the population of the city was gathered there. The Khmer Rouge were telling everyone to leave the city.

Although my two middle children were safe in France, my oldest and youngest daughters were close beside me. Parika was only seven. Mealy, who was nineteen, carried her infant son. I kept my children huddled together. As soon as a parent let go, a child would be lost in the huge crowd. My relatives said that we would stick together, but the crowd was too thick. Everybody was pushing. And the Khmer Rouge kept ordering everybody, "You must go forward." They shot their guns in the air. Even during the middle of the night, the procession was endless.

During the first week, the Communists had us travel as far as we could go. They kept ordering, "Go forward." We'd say, "Where?" They'd respond, "To the Angkar." We'd say, "Where's the Angkar?" They'd respond, "You'll see the Angkar in front of you."

We didn't understand. We'd ask everybody, "Where's the Angkar?" We thought it was a big building or something. We looked for some direction where we should go. We were exhausted, hungry. People died, day by day.

During the long procession, as we went through the outskirts of Phnom Penh, we passed a jeep with two Khmer Rouge in it. They were looking through albums and watching people as we passed by. There were pictures of Cambodian officials in their books. They immediately arrested anyone who had anything military on their bodies—tied their hands behind their backs and took them away.

We finally stopped at a marketplace at Ta Khmau. We cooked there. That night my aunt went to talk with the Khmer Rouge. She asked them to open the road that went toward Vietnam. They said, "Okay, your family can go."

When other people in the market saw us begin to pack, they did the same. We suddenly became fifty families. The Khmer Rouge said, "No, you cannot go. You must take the south road, to Takeo."

A few nights later, two Khmer Rouge came with guns. They said that my brother-in-law, my brother, and my son-in-law had to go to Phnom Penh to help rebuild the government. My brother-in-law said, "Strange that they call at this hour. It's totally bizarre." I called my son-in-law. My brother was with his wife and children in another hut.

My mother was suspicious. She asked the Khmer Rouge, "How many people did you call tonight to go?" They said, "Oh, there's a truckful on the main street." She asked them, "Do my children need to bring some rice provisions to use while they work in Phnom Penh?" They told her, "The Angkar—the Communist organization—will take care of everything."

Still, my mom put rice, dried fish, and other provisions in a bag for them. They took off, my brother driving the car, one Khmer Rouge with a gun in the front, in the back seat a Khmer Rouge between my brother-in-law and my son-in-law. The boy was married to my daughter Mealy, who was only nineteen years old. Before he departed he told me, "Please, take care of my wife." He suspected that something bad was going to happen.

The Khmer Rouge brought them to a former professional school, as soon as they got on the road. This is where the local Angkar [Khmer Rouge officials] had their headquarters. The woman who told me this now lives in Long Beach. She was very close to the Khmer Rouge. She told me that the men fought back. My brother was a police officer; he

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knew judo and karate. My brother-in-law, too. But they were killed.

The Khmer Rouge always carried out their executions very secretly. If the people witnessed them killing the doctors, intellectuals, the monks, we would have fought back. But the Angkar's politics and methods of control were very smooth. At night, when the Khmer Rouge would call people's names and take them away, we knew that they were dead. But we did not want to accept that as reality.

My father died in July 1975 from dehydration caused by dysentery. We survived thanks to my mom. She was a really great philosopher and psychologist. She knew that Khmer Rouge spies hid under our hut.

Each night, when we came back to the village from working in the fields, Mom would say, "Children, let's all go to sleep." She would quietly warn me that the wood had eyes and ears. She'd say, "It's nine o'clock now. Go to sleep. Don't talk. Save your strength to work for the Angkar. You are all girls. There is nothing else to do but work. All the men are gone in our family."

Mom was actually saying for the Khmer Rouge spies to hear, "They are only girls. Don't kill them. We are the only members left of the family." The Khmer Rouge knew this very well. They had watched us all the way. They knew that we were lying to them about our identity. It was a horrible game.

If you hid your identity, that meant you wanted your past forgotten. We had changed from people who were intellectual, who used to think independently, into part of the Angkar's "populace." You became humiliated, allowed to live only as a slave.

We stayed in that village for three months. Then the Angkar ordered everyone, "Go to your hometown." Among my family, we discussed where we would go. My idea always was to escape. But the Khmer Rouge sent us all to the countryside in Battambang Province, near Thailand, to work in the fields.

There were thousands of people in our work group. The Angkar didn't separate men and women, but young adults were sent forward, and children from seven years old were kept in a separate camp.

My daughter Mealy came back to see me every three or four months. She brought whatever she could catch on the way from the fields—lizards, crabs, worms, and wild leaves that were edible. She caught a little animal or insect and kept it in her hands until she reached my hut. Then she shared it with all of us.

My youngest, Parika, who was only eight years old, was sent to a camp where children were forced to work like adults, but with less rice to eat. They had their own children's community with their own Angkar leader, who was as young as fourteen years old.

Parika became very sick. She would sneak out of the children's camp to see me every night. She would crawl past the Khmer Rouge guards, then walk through the flooded fields with water up to her neck, then run to my hut in the village, hiding from the soldiers who stood watch.

I would save half of my rice ration so she would have something to eat. Parika would be exhausted from the three-kilometer trip, and she had to sneak back to her camp before dawn. She was sick with malaria. But there was no medicine at all.

One night Parika told me, "Mommy, I'm not going back. If I die, I want to be with you until the last second." I said, "How can we both eat? Your ration is in the children's camp." But my mom said, "Let her stay."

My grandson, who Mealy had left with us, was also dying. Luckily, three days before the infant passed away, the Khmer Rouge sent Mealy home to us. The Angkar said, "Go home, Comrade Mom, your son is dying."

All of us were staying in the same hut. While Parika and Mealy and I worked in the fields, my mom stayed home with the baby. For dinner the four of us shared three bowls of rice and a little salt every night, and some wild vegetables that I picked in the fields. If the commune's kitchen gave us some soup, it had only a little vegetables and some salt. There would seldom be more than one shrimp in the entire pot. Someone would grab it right away.

Shortly after Mealy arrived, my grandson's little body began to swell from diarrhea. He always knew that, when we heard the village bell, it was time to get our small ration. He couldn't talk, but he made a sign that told me to get it. In the morning, when I went to work, I would put some bran in a bowl for him. We just ate bran—the husks of rice. We would get sick to our stomachs, because the bran was too rough to digest, but people were so hungry they would trade a diamond ring for two cups of bran.

The morning my grandson died, it was just before breakfast. We heard the cowbell and he signaled for me to get the bran. When I came back to hut, he was too weak to eat. Mealy came to the hut and cried when she saw him. After he died, Mealy was sent to work in fields far away. But she still found ways to visit.

My mom's death especially hurt Mealy. They were very close. Mealy was the person who dug the hole and buried Mom. She only asked people to carry Mom's body to the grave. Then she told them, "Thank you. Go back home. I'll take care of her."

At that time, Mealy told me, "I am going to keep moving forward. I'm not coming back to this village. My grandmom is dead." And she disappeared.

Six months later, she came back, bringing a bowl of rice for me. She said, "Mommy, I'm sorry. But I was so upset that Grandmom died."

Most of the Khmer Rouge soldiers were very young. But the chiefs of my village were very old. They were mountain people who had always been very poor. They never saw a marketplace.

I knew that the chief had never been to a city. He asked me, "What does Phnom Penh look like? Tell me about the big city. What do you eat there?"

I told him, "In Phnom Penh, we already have 'magic eyes'—television. Magic rice-cooker—electricity. We don't need a cooking fire. Why do you need to fight?" He was so surprised, this was magic to him.

I told him, "One night, when the sky is clear and the moon is not so bright, you will see one star that doesn't stay still. That is the magic star. It's called a satellite. People invented that. They built it and sent it up there. If they want to see you through it, they see you. If they want to see me, they see me." I lied a little bit to him.

The chiefs were so astounded that men could make stars. I said, "You believe that the stars are made by gods or something magic. Now people can make that. Why do we Cambodians try to start a new society on an idea that is nonsense? Why did you destroy everything? You say that you have started to build the country from 'Year Zero' with your bare hands. What can you do with your bare hands only? When people use their heads, they create all of the things that you hear me talk about and believe are magic. Why do you do this to our country?"

That night, at the Angkar study session, the old chief said, "Nothing is worth as much as rice. People who live everywhere need rice. Those who ride airplanes, who go to the moon, still need rice. So let's cultivate rice."

That is the only thing we did—three crops a year, for four years.

During the first week of January 1979, I began to see people from other places coming through our village. I asked them, "Where are you going?" They said, "We don't know. The Khmer Rouge just keep telling us to go forward." I asked where they came from. They said, "The outskirts of Phnom Penh."

A few days later, the same faces came back. I asked, "Didn't I talk with you a few days ago?" They said, "Yes. We went to Pailin, a district near the Thailand border. Now the Khmer Rouge tell us to come back here."

Then, one afternoon, the whole village was turned upside down. People ran to the barn to get rice, and put it in baskets that they carried on top of their heads. People called me from my hut, "Please help. We are leaving the village." I asked what was happening. They said, "We don't know. The Angkar told us to leave the village."

All the way to the Cardamom Mountains, we planted rice and kept moving. One night, three male soldiers were walking quickly around our camp, stepping over our bodies. They were scared.

We asked them what was happening. They shouted, "Don't ask questions! Just get up and follow!" I couldn't follow anybody. I told my daughters, "Stay here." It was pitch-dark.

We slept until morning in a field of planted rice. It was almost noon when we suddenly saw three Vietnamese tanks. We were in an open area, cut off from the Khmer Rouge. We began to walk as fast as we could to find the National Highway. We came upon a small town. There I learned that my sister-in-law and her five children were all dead. Starvation.

We stayed in Battambang for only twelve days. The Vietnamese soldiers with loudspeakers in the streets said, "The city is but of rice. The population must go back to the fields in communal farms and plant rice." We said, "Not good. Communism is Communism. We've already been through this for four years. Let's go somewhere where we can breathe the air of freedom." We went to the countryside, but in the direction of Thailand. I told my daughters, "If we have the chance, we will run away. We will escape." After four years of living under the Communists, losing many members of our family, and being close to death, we didn't care about losing our lives any more. We only cared about freedom, no matter the risk.

We went to the outskirts of Battambang to wait for any kind of transportation. It was already dark. A truck pulled up with two Vietnamese soldiers. My cousin speaks Vietnamese. She asked them to give us a ride near the border. The driver said, "You must pay us something." So all of us gave him some gold.

Halfway to the border, a Vietnamese soldier guarding the road shot his rifle into the air. The truck stopped and all of us got out. A Vietnamese officer asked if any of us spoke Vietnamese. They took my cousin away.

The soldiers questioned her: "What did you give the driver to ride in the truck?" She continued to lie until they almost killed her. Then she told them the truth. It was pitch-dark when she came back to us.

The Vietnamese were arresting many people in the Battambang area. Not only Khmer Rouge, but many innocent, non-Communist peasants and educated people who had survived the Khmer Rouge terror. The Vietnamese feared that these people would understand that the Vietnamese fight against the Khmer Rouge was only an excuse to invade and occupy our country.

> 'Thai people stared at us in the stores. We were barefoot, right in the business district of Bangkok. But we didn't care. We had escaped death. We were proud to have survived hell.'

Fortunately, the soldiers released us. We spent the night in a barn. In the morning, we came upon some people selling noodles and cakes. We ate everything—two big baskets. The children were so hungry. Then we continued to walk on the National Highway toward Thailand

The next morning, as we were crossing the jungle, I looked down and saw a Lux soap wrapper on the ground. I told myself, "Thank God, we are back in civilization."

Being allowed into Thailand wasn't very difficult, because thousands of refugees were pouring across the border. The Thai were surprised by the Vietnamese invasion and the incredible sight of so many Cambodians close to death from hunger and disease.

The refugee camp we were taken to was hundreds of tents in a large muddy field filled with starving Cambodians. We were starving, too. We only had one spoon and a small kettle for boiling medicinal herbs. Our clothes you wouldn't believe—just rags, all torn and full of holes.

During three weeks in that border camp, I saw Cambodians buying clothes, shoes, food, and try to begin a new life. But I heard on the Thai radio that the refugees were going to be pushed back into Cambodia.

My children and I discussed if we should prepare to go back into Cambodia. I said, "Since we are here and have something to eat, let's be thankful. Whatever happens will happen. If we are pushed back we will die."

Then news on the radio about a push back became more intense. Thousands of refugees continued to arrive in the border camps. My legs were swollen from an injury during our escape, so I tried to find a doctor. At that time, a United Nations officer, an American man, was in the camp. Because I could speak some English, I talked with this man. He was very upset. He told me, "There is nothing that I can do. Refugees are being taken from my hands by the Thai."

Later that day, the United Nations officer came to my tent and warned us, "No matter how affordable the transportation may seem, don't go with anyone unless I am here. If my men are present, we will try to help you." A few days went by. I didn't know when he would be back or how to find him.

All of a sudden, a Thai major appeared at my tent. He said, "Call your daughters and put your things together. Leave behind anything you can't carry." I said, "Major, where are we going?" He said, "I'm going to take you and your children to Bangkok."

I said, "Are you sure we're going to Bangkok? Are you going to hand me over to the Khmer Rouge and send me back? The radio reports that the refugees are going to be pushed back." He said, "I'm going to take you to Bangkok."

At 11:30 a.m. he returned to my tent. We were the first group to get into the back of a very old pickup truck. A family who lived in my tent said, "Don't you remember what the United Nations officer told you? Not to go unless he was present." I said, "I remember. But the major sounds sincere." It was June 8, 1979.

We got into the truck. The motor started, and we began moving. I just sat there praying. I really didn't know where they were taking us. We didn't turn left toward Bangkok or right toward Cambodia. I became terrified.

My trust in the major saved us. We were among just three truckloads of refugees taken from the camps to safety. During a four-day period, around forty-five thousand Cambodians were forced down a mountainside into a minefield. Many people died, and others were captured by the Vietnamese.

The old truck took us to Suan Thmei, a camp near Aranyaprathet town. Cambodians had lived there even before the Cambodian exodus began. They built markets and workshops. Some Cambodian artisans gave the camp a Cambodian appearance. When we got off the truck, people greeted us. They were happy that we escaped the pushback.

I asked them, "What are you all doing here?" They said, "We are waiting for sponsors so that we can go to the United States." Some had fled the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975. They had been waiting all that time on the border for acceptance to a Western country.

My daughters and I received some pots and pans and a tent. We spent two nights in that camp. On the third day, the UNHCR

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Celia Noup at home in Lawndale with her grandchildren

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[United Nations High Commission for Refugees] officers called my two daughters and me to get on a bus, without explanation.

I was still in rags when we got to Bangkok. The only new piece of clothing I had bought in the camp was a sarong for Mealy—that's all that I could afford. In Bangkok, I met an old Cambodian friend of my husband, General Dien Del, who had returned to Thailand from Europe to organize a resistance movement. He took us to a clothing store. But we had a hard time finding anything that fit, because we were so skinny. We looked everywhere for clothes for my youngest daughter, Parika, who was twelve. She had a big stomach, swollen from malnutrition, and the rest of her was skinny. Thai people stared at us in the stores. We were barefoot, right in the business district of Bangkok. But we didn't care. We had escaped death. We were proud to have survived hell. So we weren't self-conscious about looking so terrible. And General Dien Dal wasn't ashamed to walk with us.

We were accepted to the United States thanks to my husband's military service. We were sponsored by my sister-in-law in the suburbs of Washington, D.C.

My daughters and I flew to the United States on July 4, 1979.

My sister-in-law, our sponsor, helped us to get settled. Our first apartment was in Herndon, Virginia, a suburb of Washington. Since we arrived in July, we had a few months before Parika started school.

I received a lot of phone calls from Cambodians living in many parts of the United States. Some were my former students at the Khmera-Anglais High School. Some came to visit me. They said, "I don't believe that you are alive." They were excited and phoned other friends: "Mrs. Paramoun is alive!" I was happy to see them, too. They were just like my own children.

My middle daughters, Monie and Romani, joined us from France. It was wonderful to be together again. But it was very tough at first, trying to care for the girls, go to school myself, and find a job. I didn't bring any money from Thailand, so for the first year I had to swallow my pride and take public assistance. I tried to survive with food stamps, but my older girls wanted to earn a decent living. So Mealy left for California to find work, and Monie followed soon afterward.

Romani began high school. And Parika began junior high without knowing a word of English. She had to attend two schools, one for English and one for regular classes. After about three months, she learned to speak and read pretty well.

I began taking secretarial courses, and we moved to Arlington. Even though I spoke English before, I had a difficult time speaking with Americans. I wondered, "Why don't they understand me?" Even after seven years in this country, I cannot express myself fully. I encouraged my children to learn the language fluently, like any American.

Mealy, who was twenty-three, left for California in October 1979. A few months later, during Christmas vacation, Monie, who was twenty, joined her. In California, Monie found a job as a secretary at the Imperial Bank. Mealy was already a bookkeeper at another bank.

I finished my secretarial course within a year. I found a job right away as a counselor in the Indochina Community Center in Washington. I was thrilled to get away from public assistance. I've found that America is a country where people have come from all over the world. You do your job, you get paid like anybody else, and you're accepted. But Cambodians I know in France, like my sister, feel differently. People are not accepted if they are not French. But in America, you're part of the melting pot.

I enjoyed my work in Virginia very much, but keeping my family together was more important. In 1983, I came to Los Angeles for my daughter Monie's wedding. I decided to stay. There are around thirty thousand Cambodians in Southern California. Long Beach has the largest concentration of Cambodians in the country. I called the community center in Long Beach. They said that they had no job openings. So I decided to get involved in running a store.

I talked with my sister-in-law in Virginia. She and her husband decided to come to California, too. She said, "Let's find a store. We'll do business together."

We saw that Cambodian restaurants are not very successful. But donut shops are very American. That's what many Cambodians do. We found a small donut shop in Gardena that we purchased from a Cambodian. We were too inexperienced to know that it was impossible to do business at that location. The woman who sold us the store told people that she felt like she had won a lottery when we bought it from her. My sister and I worked that donut shop for two-and-a-half years, earning just enough to live on.

Fortunately, we didn't lose the money, because I sold the shop to a Thai couple. And, at the same time, I found this shop in Lawndale. For a while my sister-in-law worked this shop while I worked the shop in Gardena.

My sister-in-law never adjusted to this kind of work. She had been a teacher's aide in Virginia and didn't know how to manage a store. And the hours in a donut shop are impossible—from 5 a.m. until 7 p.m. She and her husband and two kids went back to Virginia last summer.

All that refugees have is our work, our dreams. Do I still hurt from what happened in the past? When I opened my mouth to tell you my story, I don't know where my tears came from. It has happened before. I've cried and cried when former students have come to visit. The first time my sister phoned from Paris, I could hardly retain my composure. Everything is so different. I never dreamed that things could be this way for us.

My daughters don't like to talk about the past in Cambodia. They want to forget and think about their future. They ask me why I would talk about the past with anybody. I said, "The past cannot be erased from my memory. You are young. Maybe you can forget. Not me. The country is as important as my life. I never give up hoping to some day go back to Cambodia." But the war, the suffering there, never ends.

Another reason I work and try to save money is to be able to sponsor my cousin and her family from Cambodia. I would tell the American government that I have some income ready for them. They have a place to work in my shop. They don't have to go on public assistance.

That's one of the main reasons I want to have this donut shop and try to keep it open. There're three reasons: for my children, for my cousin's family, and for the little house that I dream of.

Whenever I can, I drive around and look at "For Sale" signs on houses. When I see a beautiful house on sale, almost new, I write down the phone number. I call up and say, "How much do you want?" They say, "It costs this much. Is this your first house? How much money do you have?" Of course, it's always too much. I don't have the money now. But the dream is always there.

I want the house not only for myself—for everybody to live in: My daughters, my relatives from Phnom Penh—they could live in the garage if we fix it up nice. We wouldn't have to pay rent and be bothered all the time. It's my American dream to have that little house. □

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