

Oral History Transcript

Interviewer: Christian Phouasalith

Interviewee: Chris Phouasalith

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Q: I'm Christian Phouasalith and this is an interview with my dad.

Chris Phouasalith: Chris Phouasalith.

Q: And today we're going to be talking about some of my dad's experiences as a child in Laos and his time as a refugee in Thailand and resettling in the United States. So, what were some of your favorite memories as a child in Laos?

Chris Phouasalith: The memory of how little things we have in Laos even though we quite well prepared our family is and memory of well, I was very little, that the free space that we could go to running around and the best part for me is going to the Mekong River and fishing and swimming and go hunting. Those my favorite and eating fruit like coconut and all sorts of fruit. We don't have much of the candy, cake, or cookie, or any dessert, basically just fruit. What kind of memory you talking about in concerning?

Q: If you have any like memories in particular, something you as a child like you know any stories.

Chris Phouasalith: Well going to school, I remember that they're pretty strict over there. I mean the teacher over there is very strong and have a lot of authority over the students on what they doing. Like if you're not being nice, if you're not being good, or if you don't do your homework, they can actually punish you.

Q: Really?

Chris Phouasalith: They can actually punish you and parade you. I remember that I was sort of bad boy, bad little boy back then. I remember that I they every morning Monday we have to go out on the field and line up and sing the national anthem, and if anyone be bad, they parade them around the people, or they during the classroom, if you're not behave they will make you go out of the class and they will punish you in either you stand on one leg with your arm stretched out and put a brick at the end of your hand and if you get tired, you moving down, they spank your arm to lift it up again or punching the blackboard with your with your fists or kneeling. All sorts of things they do or walking on your knees around the class.

Q: So that was like trying ways to like discipline you or to?

Chris Phouasalith: Yeah discipline.

Q: Or try to enforce the rules of the school?

Chris Phouasalith: Right. Right.

Q: And was that well if you remember, do you know if that was before the Communists took over or just?

Chris Phouasalith: That's the standard even before or after.

Q: Oh okay.

Chris Phouasalith: And remember of study so hard for class. We have to memorize all of the math formulas like multiplication formulas. We have to actually have to sing it. We have to sing how to do multiplication from formulas one to formulas twelve or to formula fifteen. We have to sing and memorize them all. And I remember all the year, the most important test is the final test. Doesn't matter how good you do throughout the year, if you don't pass the final test you will flunk the class. You will repeat the class. Doesn't matter doesn't matter how old you are, they still keep you in that same grade if you don't pass it. They don't just push you up.

Q: Do you think how you were raised as a child, especially your experiences in school or at home, do you think they kind of influenced what you think of children in school today or how kids should be raised today?

Chris Phouasalith: Well, I think since I see both perspectives from the way they teach in Laos by forcing your students to learn and by coming to United States and watch my children grow up by influence learn to play. I think my belief is I like American style. I was so impressed when I came here, my son [Christian Phouasalith, the interviewer] eager to learn because I play with you. I teach you by playing. Make it fun to learn. And I remember sitting down, everything I do all day long, I play with you. And not play but its learning, teaching you how to learn and we everything my lesson that I teaching you actually influence fun. Like counting is fun, reading is fun, and I just make fun out of everything. And you love that. And I remember that you actually can read before you go to preschool. You know all the ABC's. You know everything. You know all the constellations, you love the constellations, you remember that. And daddy make fun with playing and I look for the computer games that play and learn how to pronounce how to sound out all the syllables and so on. And I think learn and play is better because the way they teach over there, they actually put fear in your heart. That's what they do in Laos because Laos is either under French influence which is French colony and the French are they want to keep people to fear them. So, the way teaching them to put the fear in your heart, so you are afraid of higher authority all the time. Not as become independent, become bold of your thoughts. Like when I came to United States, I still remember, I'm not supposed to speak up to the authority, to my boss even though I know I'm right. I have to have courage and overcome that fear that put in my heart when I was little.

Q: And was like how the French influenced Laos or was that just the culture that you grew up in?

Chris Phouasalith: Well, the French influenced the way they want to taught the people to keep fearing them and also worse that the Communists came and even worse than French because Communists teach children to be like patriots to them. By patriot, that means that become like a spy like even though we don't know it. We have a teacher in the school that is pro-government.

Q: Like a political officer or something?

Chris Phouasalith: Right. To become a teacher and teach the children and sing the songs that is pro-government or watch the movie or do everything is to promote us to be a patriot in a way that

is to prove ourselves to the government. That everything is for the government, everything is for the country. Basically, a lot of people being shut off because they couldn't even talk to their child. They could not express anything to their children because their children would talk, would go to school and talk about "oh my father that and my mother this, we listen to the radio". They would ask us if we listened to the radio, in what language, and that's a crime.

Q: Really?

Chris Phouasalith: Well, if you listen to the radio and it's in English, you have knowledge of the outside information.

Q: So, things of French influence would be?

Chris Phouasalith: Doesn't matter if it is English or French. That means that your family is traitor. Doesn't matter what you listen to. And of course, the children don't know that it is a crime, they just say things out of pride sometimes, out of innocence. And then authorities would report to higher authorities and they would come and take your parents.

Q: So, they would do stuff just like that? Just on a regular basis?

Chris Phouasalith: Yeah, and they would send the parents or the educated people because educated people is that one who know what is going on, the ones that listen to the news. They taken to the north of Laos to the hard labor camp and to what do you call it?

Q: Reeducation camp?

Chris Phouasalith: To the reeducation camp. You know, a lot of people never made it back. They die in the camp.

Q: And how aware were you of all of this as a child?

Chris Phouasalith: As a child, I don't aware of it much. Parents know and I know but most people think that they do the right thing by proving themselves that they for the country. Children don't know. All they do to prove that they're loyal patriot by reporting your family. Even if you read the newspaper that other language or especially the radio.

Q: I'm just curious, what did you think, if you had any knowledge, of the United States before moving here? So maybe as you were growing up or later as a refugee?

Chris Phouasalith: What do you mean?

Q: Like did you learn anything about the United States as a child in Laos?

Chris Phouasalith: No, I come to the United States with no idea. Don't even know what the United States like. I don't even know what they eat really. I don't even know how it going to be. I remember that we were refugee, we don't know what kind of food we were going to eat over here. I remember that my sister and my mom actually dried fresh ingredients to cook like garlic. They didn't know that we are going to have it over here. So, they actually dry out food for ingredients to cook over here because we didn't know that we have it, we don't know.

Q: So, they would like prepare ingredients and would have that ready when they came over to the US?

Chris Phouasalith: Yeah, ingredients like little things but not going to make it, and I don't know even when I came to United States. I remember the first day I came to United States, we landed in Los Angeles and came to San Francisco, and I remember that I was so alien, put it that way, because I don't know anything. I remember that I go out on the front door one time and the front door have a gate, and I remember seeing the big, red switch and I thought that was a light switch so I pull it down and it make a lot of noise, a bell ring very loud. That scare me a lot, so the ring come from the outside and then I go outside to take a look at the ring and the gate shut by itself because it had automatic shut. And then I could not come inside the house and within five minutes or so, I hear a loud vehicle come toward me with lights flashing. I ran, that's how alien I was. And I remember that on the street, I don't dare to turn left or right because I can't read. I just walk on street from the end to the end. I don't dare turn left or right because they all look the same, just block, block, block. And the buildings look pretty much the same to me and I wondering to myself, "How am I going to make it here? I don't know the language, I don't know the culture, I don't know anything." I actually learn how to read, write, ABC's when I was sixteen when I get here. And I remember after a year or so in this country, I could not speak much yet. I remember people ask me, "How old are you?" I would say, "Fine, thank you." I remember that. And I remember walking on the street, some tourists would come ask me for directions and I just said one thing, "I don't know" and I remember saying, "No English." And it give me time to think about, "What am I going to do here to survive?" So, by learning ABC's and go to school, my dream was to be an engineer or architecture, but I knew that I'm not going to make it because of the language barrier. I went to mechanic school instead, thinking that at least wherever I go in this country or anywhere, there will be cars or something that I can fix.

Q: Based off what you just said of some of your first experiences here in the US, what did you think of the US when you first came here? Did you like it, did you not like it? Like you said, it was alien almost and very uncomfortable. Almost a culture shock.

Chris Phouasalith: Well when I first came here and the first year, I don't know anything. I mean, I don't speak the language, I don't know the culture, and I don't know a lot of people but down the road when I learned the language, I realized one thing, how kind people are. I don't know that if I being lucky or my boss being so good to me. Of course, I believe in God, I pray. I became a Christian as a refugee and then I came here and then I pray and ask that I can learn, I can be able to feed myself, and take care of my family down the road. So, I asked for two things: I asked for time to go to school and a place that I can work so that I can survive. I got a job across the street from where I stay, and I go to work and they very good to me. I get to go to school on the nighttime and go to work on the daytime. And I learned a lot of things that in this country that we have so much freedom to be whoever we want to be, but of course the thing that we want to be is not freely given to us. We have to earn it. So, I worked hard diligently. Go out and earn it. And that's the way our family believe. Yes, we came here with the privileges that this country gave us that were on welfare. We have welfare to survive and, in the meanwhile, we can go to school and learn. And one thing our family do is that we commit that we not going to be stuck on welfare.

Q: We were going to work our way off.

Chris Phouasalith: We were going to work our way off. Even though welfare workers told us there's ways to stay on welfare. If welfare runs out, then we can go to doctor and become unfit to work. Become handicap or not smart enough to work or our language was not good enough and so on. Our family just don't believe in that kind of thing. We want to be able to work, be able to

be independent, be able to be a good role model for the next generation. Like daddy been telling you before, be able to achieve. We determined to get out of government assistance which is wonderful that they have it. But at the same time, it is like a drug. A lot of people addicted to it and stuck with it.

Q: Now that you're reminiscing about it, how difficult it must've been the first couple of years, what made our family, especially my grandfather, your father, leave Laos and come to the United States? Or just leaving Laos in the first place?

Chris Phouasalith: Well, that was the most difficult decision that your grandfather made. But, it's the right thing to do. Imagine if you are a guy that who is an entrepreneur and all of a sudden, the government become Communist. The Communist government coming in and regulate everything that you do, how much money you can have physically. Even though you have it, you cannot get it; it's yours, but you cannot have it because you have to be equal with everybody else. And my dad was in retail during when the Communists came, selling products we imported from Thailand and sell to the people. And when the Communists came, we cannot sell those because the government regulate everything that we sell. We cannot compete with the governments' stores. And because that's a crime if you compete with government stores. And the government come in and said to my dad that, "You can sell this but not anything that compete with the government and basically threaten to put him in jail if he does, which is illegal, and you cannot close the store either." You have to keep the store open, but you cannot sell it and also inflation is so bad in Communist countries.

Q: Once they took over right?

Chris Phouasalith: Yeah, inflation is so bad that Lao money wasn't worth anything and within the first few years, things get worse and worse. The money isn't worth anything because of the inflation, and all of a sudden, without warning, government will set up booths and everybody would have to bring their money in, if you have cash, and exchange it for the new money. And the new money is worth, like if the old money is worth a thousand dollars, you can trade for one dollar in the new money. But in Laos, it is a kip [Laotian currency]. Like a thousand kip, you can get only so much in the new kip, if you have cash. And that's how they devalued their money, to make it look like it worth much more now. But I remember it happen at least three times, they do that about three times in a few years. And plus, you know we were we being watched, where we go, what we do, what we wear, what we talk, what kind of song that we sing, where we you go, and the food, the resources, everything being regulated. Food shortages, people have to go in line to buy food from the government store because nobody sell anything because they compete with the government. So, people get in line for hours and hours and by the time they get there, they probably ran out. And you know, people were very happy at first, when the Communists came, because all of the preaching so good. Everything going to be free, everything going to be provided, free healthcare, no tax, no foreigners. We are free of foreigners occupying. Free school, free everything. We will be free. But free come with the cost of freedom of the people, thoughts of what can we do, what can we say. A lot of times if you say anything bad against the government, you're not going to see the daylight. They come in the middle of the night and take you and then there's no such thing as a trial. They will shoot you on the spot without question.

Q: Did you know about this or was it just like implied?

Chris Phouasalith: Well it happen to several people and they just make an example out of many people and the word go around. Everybody know not to speak bad about the government. You know, when the government need labor, they just come and assign you to come work for the

government like a day job or whatever for free. To carry things, to move equipment. Free labor for the government, they portray it as being a patriot to work for the government for a day's work. And they just tell you where to go, what you going to do, and you just have to go. If not, then you going to be in jail because when the Communists come, you cannot move from city to city, from town to town. You just cannot get on a truck or car and go. You have to apply for it. You have to have permission to travel from city to city or where you going, and for what, and for how long. It's like you are already in jail within your own town. So, they watch everything.

Q: And that was one of the reasons why our family wanted to leave? They just wanted a better life?

Chris Phouasalith: Yeah, because what's the point of stay in your own town when you already lose everything? Yes, everybody equal because we were all broke. Yes, we are all equal because in jail, in government labor camps, kind of like. So, what kind of life is that?

Q: How did our family escape from Laos?

Chris Phouasalith: Our family is unique from other families. Even before the Communists came, our family already scattered all over the country so we hardly ever together. Like Bounhom, Kao, they always go to school in Louang Prabang and Lenh is working in Vientiane, which is Laos's capital. And Ron is already somewhere else, even before the Communists, because somebody go to school, or somebody go to work somewhere else and they sneak out. [Bounhom, Kao, Lenh, and Ron are Chris Phouasalith's brothers.] My brother Lenh, he get on a boat in the middle of the night, hire somebody else to paddle him across the river in the middle of the night. And they have the army walk back and forth along the Mekong River and if they see you in the middle of the night in a paddleboat, they will shoot, no questions asked. And we have to do it secretly because there are undercover people that who will say anything. For me, when I escaped from Laos, I don't even dare to tell my friends where I am going. I used to go to school in Vientiane too during that time, and I remember that I wanted to give my soccer ball to my best friend and tennis shoes to my best friend before I leave. That's the only two things that were treasures to me. But I wouldn't even dare to do that, afraid that they would think that I am leaving.

Q: You didn't want to raise any suspicions.

Chris Phouasalith: Yeah so, I kept everything at home, and I applied for permission, because I used to go to school in Vientiane, and going to Vientiane I had to go on a boat. And then on the boat, we have to stop for lunch somewhere. And I know my route, so we stop for lunch and then I just start walking from there to Thailand. Take me a day's walk.

Q: And then what happened?

Chris Phouasalith: When I got to Thailand, our family had connections. Many families were not as fortunate like us. Our family had connections, so we have relatives in Thailand that we could go to and then they arranged for me to go to refugee camp. I remember that I get on a motorcycle and the Thai policeman stopped us. And sent us to refugee camp.

Q: So, our family escaped individually and then they all met up in Thailand?

Chris Phouasalith: Yeah, individually. It take us many years for our family to get out. All of them. Take many years but most of our family like Sheila [Chris Phouasalith's sister], Ron, Kao,

and Bounhom already came and out in Thailand way ahead of us because my dad know because dad was a refugee from China. Your grandfather was a refugee from China when he was little. And he was a refugee from China to escape the Communists. He grew up in Thailand and marry your grandmother in Laos. As soon as the Communists came, he already knew what to do because he already know about it. So, he prepare, send your uncles and aunts to Thailand maybe four to five years before us. At first, we didn't think of come to United States. We was going to go reestablish ourselves in Thailand because we have friends and family in Thailand. But we cannot stay in Thailand because Thai police and the people know that we aren't Thai, but we are Laotian. And from time to time, they will come and blackmail us. Like if we don't give them money, then they will report us to the government. So, we decide that we would go to a third country.

Q: Even as a refugee, they would still.

Chris Phouasalith: No, your uncle came to Thailand. Not going to be a refugee at first. Your uncle come to Thailand to become Thai. They actually established there in Thailand to become Thai people. To go to school there, to work there, to become Thai. At first, we didn't think more than that. They probably been there for four to five years. You know, your aunt Sheila was going to the flea market and sell things like clothes or other items. She put things in cart and go to flea market and sell stuff. And Bounhom and Kao actually go to school in Thailand. High school. Until much later, they realized that it wasn't going to work out so Kao and Bounhom go to refugee camp. From there on, we all go to refugee camp.

Q: How was it, living in the refugee camp?

Chris Phouasalith: It's hard, imagine that within fifteen by ten or twenty by ten square foot, that's where we lived. That's where we eat, that's where we take showers, and everything is there. It does have one electric outlet because Thailand was quite civilized. And we eat food that they give to us that was a lot of the time, not enough and no good. And no running water so I have to push a fifty-gallon barrel with a bicycle wheel on it about a mile to get water for my family.

Q: How long was our family there? In the refugee camp?

Chris Phouasalith: We were in refugee camp about two years to apply with the United States to come here.

Q: Yeah, I was going to ask, once our family was in the refugee camp, how did our family decide to come to the United States or any other country?

Chris Phouasalith: Well, we decide to come to United States because Bounhom and Kao were already here. Bounhom and Kao were the most educated people in our family back then. And Bounhom and Kao were the first two people that come to United States and we just follow them. So, they don't know anything much but that's where we go. And the only thing we knew about America was freedom.

Q: Do you know how Uncle Bounhom and Uncle Kao found out about the US?

Chris Phouasalith: Well, remember that Bounhom and Kao were the most educated people in our family. They were sent to the best schools in Luang Prabang. I don't know how they know

but I know that they're the most educated people in our family. We just followed them basically. It's not because we know much about it.

Q: So, once you came here, I know we talked earlier about some of the difficulties when you moved here. What were some things you did to overcome them?

Chris Phouasalith: What did I do to overcome them? Go to school and work. Struggle and determined ourselves to be free, to be independent. We struggled to get out of welfare so that we don't be stuck in welfare even though we appreciate it very much that they do have a safety net for us. Struggle doesn't mean that we were forced to stay in welfare, what it means that we want to be able to support ourselves, we want to be independent, we want to earn our way, to make whatever we want to make. Opportunity and freedom is here for us to grab it but we have to work to get it. We have language barrier, we have culture barrier, we have the way we look, we have our accents, so we had a lot to overcome. Back in my head, I have to say that I have to work three times harder than the people who were from here in order to be equal. For us to achieve what we need to achieve. We have to overcome all of that barrier, so we see that this land is plentiful, is very rich, and that we just have to go out and work for it and earn it.

Q: You said that school and work were the two things that made you successful in this country.

Chris Phouasalith: Yeah, school, work, and have a plan. Be something. Want to make a difference in life.

Q: What were some examples of that?

Chris Phouasalith: Examples of that? I go to school at nighttime, I work during the daytime, and I save up. And I have goals to do. And let's say when I was in school, I'm thinking that I want to be engineer but I can't be engineer because of the language barrier. Who wants to hire an engineer or architect that have language barrier?

[Interruption due to technical difficulties]

Chris Phouasalith: Where am I at?

Q: Talking about your friend after the computer. [How Chris Phouasalith learned how to become a day trader and invest in real estate]

Chris Phouasalith: Oh, and then imagine if you're a small auto body shop, you have to work very quickly to get the job out. And when I don't have a job, I just have to sit there and wait for a job to come in. And in the meanwhile, I have to pay for rent, I have to pay for the insurance, pay for the software that I need. So how am I going to do that? So, I figure out that I have to buy wrecked cars from auctions, to keep my job busy. So, if I don't have customers come in, I'm fixing my own cars that I bought and keep my parking lot looking busy all the time, so it looks good. It's like a restaurant, if you look in the window and nobody's sitting there, something's wrong or not good food. So that's what I figured. Then I met a friend who said, "Chris! Why don't I show you this?" He introduced me to trading stocks, so I become a day trader. So, I get up early in the morning, go to the office, and sit in front of the computer for three to four hours to read and look at graphs and trade penny stocks. That's where I start. So, I get better and better and after about three to four hours trading stocks, I go to do auto body work. And after that, I thought about, I always have good friends that teach me things, telling me things, and I'm very good with my hand so I want to change my circumstances that I'm in. I don't want to be working until I'm dead. I know that stocks are good, but it is very volatile, very dangerous.

Q: And what time was this around?

Chris Phouasalith: What do you what time?

Q: Like when you made that decision about the stocks?

Chris Phouasalith: I don't remember the year, but I remember that. What year did San Francisco have a bad earthquake?

Q: 1989. [1989 Loma Prieta earthquake]

Chris Phouasalith: Yeah, around there. I remember that daddy was doing stocks around that time. When the earthquake hit, I was inside a car, fixing it. I liked doing stocks because I could be anywhere in the world, still can make money and lose a lot of money too. So, I want something more tangible. Something more reliable. So, I go into real estate. I buy land, empty lots. I learn about real estate, read about real estate, and I talk to a friend who is a white guy who is one of my best friends. He's Vice President of a company that builds high rises in San Francisco. Rod. [Not Chris Phouasalith's brother Rod]. He married a Thai girl and we are very best friends. So, he talks to me about real estate and I start buying real estate, I start put in land lock which is I lock in the land before they develop the land. So if I know that this is an area that they are going to develop the land, I find out who's the developer and I start buying a lot or two lots before they actually develop the land so that by the time they develop the land, I already make money. I buy it very cheap. Same thing with the stock. You buy low and sell high. And I also fix the home we stayed in. Turned one home into a duplex. And I realized that this is what I wanted to do because real estate is tangible. It's not like stock. You have a lot of money, but it is just a number unless you cash it out. It can be wiped out at any time. So real estate is more tangible. I bought six lots in Florida. I shop all over the country to find good deals. I bought land in Vallejo [Vallejo, California] and quite a few places. When the time come, I acquired so many places that it scattered all over the place and it's hard to manage because I have to rely on people to manage it. I cannot just go over here and do this, go over here and do that. I have to have people to maintain this. I figure that I want to consolidate things.