Introduction to the Cambodian-American Women Oral History Project

Courage and Resiliency: the Cambodian-American Women Oral History Project at Schlesinger Library has had a long and distinguished history since its original conception in the early 1980s. At that time, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians were being resettled in the United States. The American people know little about the Khmer Rouge and its murderous regime (1975-1979) that killed an estimated 2-4 million Cambodian citizens. Although Cambodian women were less likely than men to be executed, they suffered a great number of trauma events including starvation, incarceration, torture, the witnessing of the execution of family members, abuse and starvation deaths of their children and sexual violence. Upon arrival as refugees in America, these women faced the incredible task of building a new life for themselves and their remaining family members.

In December 1981, a small group of concerned mental health clinicians, under my direction, established in a primary health clinic in Brighton a small voluntary clinic, the Indochinese Psychiatry Clinic, to respond to the physical and mental damage caused by the war and the refugee experience. The impact of violence on our Indochinese patients was for many emotionally and socially disabling. We noticed that the Cambodian women, in particular, were the most symptomatic of all refugee cases that we were treating. They were also the most traumatized. Yet, surprisingly after months of treatment, Cambodian women revealed the most dramatic record of involvement.

Out of this revolution, we realized that these Cambodian women could provide us with important clinical insights into survival and healing. Yet, we also realized that we did not have the complete story on any one patient. And so, had the epiphany that we really needed the oral histories of refugees to teach us and guide us in this work.

A number of remarkable women facilitated the funding and implementation of this oral history project which has become the foundation of the clinical, research and policy work of the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma; Dr. Patricia King, Director of the Schlesinger Library, immediately shared an interest in our concept of A Cambodian women oral history project. Dr. King, unfortunately, died during the middle phase of the project. It is in her honor that this collection of oral histories is dedicated. Dr. King was a great mentor to my project co-director, Ms. Svang Tor (Lee) and myself. Dr. King was the first scholar to understand the profound importance of collecting the oral history of traumatized refugee women. Her brilliant and nurturing support helped us achieve a result beyond anything originally conceived. She was our Harvard group’s first mentor and we know she would have been extremely proud of these completed volumes of oral histories.

Ms. Sheila Biddle of the Ford Foundation funded our work and was an active hand on program officer. It must be remembered that in early 1980s little was known of the Pol Pot genocide and the Cambodian refugee experience. Ms. Biddle had the courage to invest herself in this new idea of ours.

Ms. Ruth Hill who had conducted the oral histories of black women at Schlesinger Library served as our advisor and has provided us nurturing support over a long and tedious process. In fact, Courage and Resiliency modeled itself and Ms. Hill’s work by linking the oral histories to a photo-documentary by the acclaimed Cambridge photographer Marcus Halevy. In the tradition of Ruth Hill’s work, this exhibition is still touring the country.

Finally, great credit must go to Ms. Svang Tor(Lee) my project co-director and the ten women oral historians. Ms. Tor(Lee) is one of our oral historians as well. Ms. Tor has been extremely patient with me, bring along an American listener to all oral history interviews even these conducted entirely in Khmer. I firmly believe that our partnership with an American doctor and a Cambodian teacher who survived the killing fields helped generate the extraordinary honesty and profound human insight on survival and healing displayed in these oral histories. It was very hard for Ms. Tor (Lee) to conduct these interviews since during each interview she relieved her own trauma.

All of the Cambodian women in this anthology of oral histories have spoken to history they have seized the opportunity out of their traumatic lives to share with us their joys and suffering. After more than a decade of working on this project, the title Courage and Resiliency is no longer a cliché, but a living reality based up a wealth of empirical information. In spite of the tremendous sadness in each oral history, a celebration of life shines through us.

It has been an honor for me to have participated in this project.

**-Richard F, Mollica, MD, MAR**