

Saving Four Lives

The story began for me on 11 March 1979, when Mrs Var Hong, her two daughters and her sister, struggled out of Cambodia amongst a group of 207 people. For Var, her younger sister, Vyada, and her two daughters, Somaly and Panita, the story had begun nearly four years earlier when the Khmer Rouge marched victoriously into Phnom Penh on the 17th of April, 1975. Together with the rest of the capital's population, this family of four were forced to leave the city and walk westwards. Var's husband had gone to France during the previous year to continue his studies and had not returned before the dramatic fall of Phnom Penh.

Var and her family ended up in a village not far from Thmar Puok, the provincial capital of the province that sits along the Thai border in north-west Cambodia. For almost four years they lived in fear, toiling daily in the fields, watching others die from starvation or being taken away by the Khmer Rouge never to be seen again. There was no schooling for the children, only the education that their experience would imprint on their minds. They watched others die at the hands of the Khmer Rouge and wondered when their own turn would come. They prayed for release and waited.

At the end of December 1978, tired of the Khmer Rouge making cross-border raids, the Vietnamese launched their lightning thrusts into Cambodia. Town after town was abandoned in front of the invaders, and before long they had reached the north-west. There was joy as the Khmer Rouge departed, but fear as they returned after the Vietnamese pulled out. Amidst the constantly changing fortunes of war, many small groups slipped past the Khmer Rouge along the border and crossed over to the expected safety of Thailand. It was in one of these small groups that Var and her family escaped, arriving exhausted at the border at 7.00 am on 11th March 1979. Initially, they were taken to the police station at Ta Phraya, the district headquarters. However, orders soon arrived that they should be moved to another detention centre at Wat Koh, Aranya Prathet, 50 kms.to the south. They arrived there mid-afternoon, and joined about 1,500 other recent escapees.

My team of volunteers and I were working in the new camp, distributing plates, spoons, mugs, soap, sleeping mats and blankets to these new groups. It was in the evening that I first met Var, Vyada, Somaly and Panita. I talked to them for a while about the situation in Cambodia, as Var spoke very good English, having worked previously for organisations such as World Vision in Phnom Penh. One of my helpers, Mr.Peng Sy, from the refugee camp 7 kms away, was delighted to see her as she was his cousin, and they had not seen each other for four years. Somaly (10 years) and Panita (6 years) were introduced to me, and this, their first contact with westerners, proved to be very different from what normally happened. They greeted me warmly, in stark contrast to the usual new refugee children, who often shrank away in fear at the sight of a white skinned man with a black beard. In contrast, these two were friendly and at ease with everyone and they soon won the hearts of everyone they met.

The following day, Monday, I was in Wat Koh working with Peng Sy, as we were in the process of constructing new shelters and toilets for the newcomers. In the early evening, I went again to talk with Var, and noticed a large blister on the back of her hand which she had

covered with gentian-violet ointment. She said it was giving her some pain, and I was on the verge of telling her to wait until the next day before seeing the Thai Red Cross nurse, when I noticed that her hand was swollen and there were red streaks going up her arm. The poison inside, whatever it was, was spreading. I went with Peng Sy to see the camp commander to ask for permission to take her to the regular refugee camp hospital. At first he refused, but then agreed that we could take her to see the American doctor, John Napponick, for treatment in town. Having thus secured permission to take her out of the centre, I took her immediately to see John who, although uncertain exactly what was wrong, recommended that she be taken to the hospital in the main refugee camp for observation and go on a heavy dosage of penicillin to counter the infection.

I immediately took her there, and then went back to the camp chief in Wat Koh to explain that it was a very serious case, and that she would be in hospital overnight. Little did we realise just how serious it was. From then on, her arm became very swollen and over the next few days we watched it turn red and purple with huge water blisters as big as tennis balls hanging from the side of her arm. She was transferred into the Aranya Prathet district hospital, and anthrax was diagnosed, although tests taken could not prove this conclusively since she had already started her course of penicillin. It was probably only the prompt action of John in putting her on a high dosage of penicillin that saved her. She was placed in an isolation room and Vyada stayed with her to look after her. Peng Sy was able to obtain special permission to keep Somaly and Panita with him in the camp whilst Var was recovering. Eventually, Var was sufficiently well to return to the camp hospital, although treatment was still necessary. The awful blisters and swelling on her arm gradually disappeared, but the original blister on the back of her hand remained, and John eventually had to cut away much of the dead flesh. In the meantime an English TV team came and during the course of their film did an interview with her. In the camp she became as well known as her cousin, Peng Sy, who was one of the camp leaders together with his friend Sarun. Somaly and Panita, with their brilliant smiles, became known to all, and Vyada soon fell in love with Sarun. All seemed to be light and joy. They had escaped from the horrors of Cambodia, and although still confined to a refugee camp, they were beginning to know the hope of living once more. The excuse of continued treatment for Var's hand was maintained in order for them to be allowed to stay in the main refugee camp where conditions were better.

At 7.00 am on Thursday, April the 12th, the blow fell. The Thai army, led by a number of secret agents based in the area, arrived at Wat Koh early in the morning with a large number of buses. The refugees, many of whom had husbands and fathers in the Aran camp, were told that they were being taken to another refugee camp in Klong Yai District, Trat Province. Everyone was quickly bundled onto the buses in seemingly needless haste. Meanwhile at the main refugee camp 7 kms away, the guards swooped down on the camp hospital where some 12 patients, attended by close relatives, were being treated for ailments ranging from Var's anthrax, through severe T.B., to a man recovering from having his throat slashed open by Khmer Rouge soldiers. The guards had orders to take anyone from Wat Koh who was in the hospital, and they followed their orders whether or not the people were in a fit condition to

travel. At the time the guards came, Var, Vyada, Somaly and Panita were not in the hospital but were all visiting Peng Sy in a different part of the camp, and so missed the net. The other patients were taken off to Wat Koh and placed on the buses. Pleas on behalf of the man with the cut throat and two severe TB cases that they were not fit to travel were successful and these were sent back to the camp. By 8.30 am the buses had all left leaving a deserted camp.

I was in Bangkok attending a coordination meeting about providing aid to all the new refugees. At 9.30 am, shortly after the buses had left, I was called out of the meeting to answer a phone call. The call was from Aranya Prathet and I was given the news of the transfer. I returned to the meeting and reported on the call. There was a hushed silence as people struggled to absorb the news, and then a chorus of "why"? At the meeting immediately afterwards, which was attended by the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and UNHCR, the MoI was clearly out of the picture. They had no knowledge of the move and it was news to them. The UNHCR representative in the meeting reported that he had been in touch with Supreme Command and had been assured of two things; firstly that these people were being moved to the camp at Nong Yai, Trat, and secondly that there was adequate provision made for shelter etc.

Meanwhile, in Aranya Prathet, the UNHCR Field Officer was all set to follow the buses when he received news of another 1,000 people attempting to flee into Thailand close by, and that the Thai authorities were trying to push them back. In view of the assurances given about the safety of the other 1,700, he therefore went to try and intervene on behalf of the new escapees. In the end, it turned out that his intervention was unsuccessful, and all the new refugees were forced back into Cambodia.

I returned to Aranya Prathet that afternoon and went straight to the camp, where I saw for myself that Var, Vyada, Somaly, and Panita had escaped the net. I warned them to lie low for a while and told Peng Sy to keep them hidden. For the next few days they kept out of sight as much as possible, but they were rapidly becoming known throughout the camp, and all the foreigners working there came to regard them as a cause celebre. On Tuesday, 17th April, Var discussed the situation with me and asked if it was possible for them to go to England. By the 19th of April, Peng Sy was getting worried about his cousin's situation. The District Officer had already told me that he knew that the family was in the camp. Peng Sy and I decided that the best approach would be for Peng Sy to write a letter to the District Officer, explaining why Var had not gone with the 1,700, and to officially request him to allow her to stay temporarily in the camp until her hand was healed. I talked to Dr. John Naponnick, and he wrote a covering letter to say that she was still in need of medical attention. I was about to go and deliver it to the District Officer, when we received the first news that the 1,700 had not arrived in the Trat camp, but had instead been sent back across the border of Thailand into Cambodia. The report had come fourth-hand. Someone had escaped and told a friend, who told another friend, who told me. This first hint that the 1,700 had been sent back into Cambodia chilled us and we didn't want to believe it. I warned the small group in the camp who knew, not to spread the news around until we were sure, lest there were an uncontrollable reaction from relatives. I left immediately for Bangkok in the early evening with the person who knew the man who had escaped. We arrived in Bangkok at 10.00 pm

and went straight to the house of a senior UNHCR official to tell him what we knew. He immediately placed a call to Trat to try and speak to the ICRC Delegate, who was in the area. Finally, the call came through and ICRC confirmed our worst fears. 30 buses had been seen going up the road to the border – all had come back empty.

From that point on Var and the others lived in fear, wondering when the Thai authorities would come to arrest them and send them back to Cambodia. We decided that the best thing to do was to get them out of Thailand and into a third country as soon as possible. We discussed the advantages and disadvantages of resettlement countries like America, France and England, but, after all the discussions, we realised that the real problem was not acceptance by a third country – the problem was how to leave Thailand.

For a refugee to leave Thailand for a third country there is a certain procedure that has to be followed. First, he has to be interviewed by the Embassy of that country and be accepted for resettlement. Second, his name is placed on a UNHCR movement list for him to be brought to a Bangkok Transit Centre for the final stages of paperwork, medical checks, etc. However, it is this movement from the camp to Bangkok, which would be the main problem. When the buses arrive at the camp to transport the refugees to Bangkok, they are accompanied by the UNHCR movement list. The buses are parked outside the camp and each person on the UNHCR list is called by name to the bus. As the names are called, they are simultaneously checked off against the camp list on which all the refugees in the camp should be registered. Any who are not on the registered camp list are not allowed to go to Bangkok. This was a security mechanism to prevent non-refugees being resettled abroad.

However, therein lay the problem. Var, Vyada, Somaly, and Panita were in the camp 'illegally', and there was no chance of getting them legally registered. To have even requested registration in the current political climate, when the Thai military seemed to be taking unilateral steps to return all new refugees, would have risked getting them arrested and sent back over the border. While the possibility existed to get their names registered "unofficially" on the camp list, this also would not have worked. Too many of the camp authorities knew the family. They would have been recognised as they went through the gate to the buses, and then there would have been some awkward questions as to how their names came to be on the camp list when they were clearly "illegals". We had to have another plan, but obviously the first move was to get them accepted for resettlement in a third country. After some discussion, we decided to request England to accept them for resettlement – for three reasons. Firstly, they had expressed a wish to go there. Secondly, we would be better able to assist them to resettle in England than we would in another country. And thirdly, most importantly, England did not have a regular programme to accept refugees from Thailand. This meant that any cases, which were presented, would be out of the normal. Since this was going to be a special case, it was preferable to go through a non-normal channel, than through a regular refugee resettlement programme such as for U.S.A. or France, where any irregularity would be very noticeable. For England, an irregularity might be overlooked more easily since there was no ongoing resettlement programme.

I immediately got in touch with my father in England, who set the ball rolling by contacting various people in the Home Office and explaining the urgency of the situation. The Home Office officials were very helpful, and felt that this was a priority case, which could be given urgent consideration on compassionate grounds given the very real possibility of the family being returned to Cambodia. The Home Office felt that the application for entry visas into the U.K. should be made by UNHCR to the British Embassy in Bangkok, and so on Friday, 4th May, I talked with a senior official of UNHCR about the visa applications. He said that the quickest way would be for him to cable the UNHCR representative in London and get him to put in a request for visas direct to the Home Office. He promised to do it immediately. However, when I talked with him again on Monday, 7th May, he spoke of possible complications. He had discussed the case with the Regional Representative for UNHCR, who felt that the whole case should be explained to the British Embassy, i.e. that Var and her family were "illegals", in case of possible future consequences. This might result in the Embassy hesitating to get involved. UNHCR promised to call the Embassy and try to persuade them.

Meanwhile, I returned to Aranya Prathet, and on Wednesday, 9th May, we were very concerned by rumours of newcomers in Ta Phraya and Wat Koh being trucked back into Cambodia. I got up early on Thursday at 5.00 a.m. and went to Ta Phraya with the ICRC Delegate. The refugees had been told that they would be moved at 10.00 a.m. It seemed that the rumours might be true. I left Ta Phraya and went back to Aranya Prathet to phone Bangkok. I stopped briefly at the camp, and told Var and family to sneak out the side and meet me on the road. If the Thai authorities were going to move the newcomers from Wat Koh, then it was entirely possible that they would come to take Var and family as well. I picked them up on the road and took them into Aranya Prathet to our team house, where they stayed all day. In the meantime, I drove back to Ta Phraya. At 10.00 a.m., a truck came to Ta Phraya and took a group of 23 people. I followed them back to Aranya Prathet, and they were taken into the old Wat Koh camp. The motive behind this move was hard to understand. No other movement took place, and in the evening I took Var and family back to the camp. It had been a worrying day.

On Friday, 11th May, a new development took place. At 5.00 p.m. a call came through on the phone from Julian Manyon of TV Eye, Thames Television. He had heard from my father about the 1,700 being sent back and the difficult situation that Var and family were now in. He asked what they could do to help. I suggested that he could put pressure on the Home Office to issue entry visas quickly. I told him about the situation along the border, as well as the political background, and he said that they would discuss it amongst themselves and he would call back. At 6.00 p.m. he called again to say that they had decided to come out and do a documentary on the 1,700 and the present situation. They would also do an interview with Var. He said that he would get in touch with the Home Office, and he could almost guarantee that entry visas would be issued immediately.

The speed of the modern world is amazing. By 3.00 p.m. the following afternoon, Julian and the film crew were at our house. They had caught a Concorde plane to Singapore, got a connecting flight to Bangkok, and come straight to the border from the airport. They wanted

to start work immediately, so I took them round to Wat Koh and they filmed there. I had already been into the camp in the morning and told Var of the strong possibility of England accepting them. They were overjoyed. When Julian arrived, he said that when he contacted the Home Office, they had assured him that a cable authorising the visas would be sent straight to the Embassy in Bangkok.

Sunday, May 13th, was a memorable day. The TV Eye crew filmed Var and others in the camp. Then came the historic visit of Kurt Waldheim, Secretary-General of the United Nations, who was coming to see for himself the situation along the border. He arrived at the camp at 3.30 p.m. Our initial fears that he would be tightly controlled by the Thai authorities were soon allayed. The UNHCR Field Officer took him under his wing and escorted him round the camp, first to the hospital, where Dr. John Naponnick told him about the sick patients. These included some from the 1,700 who were too sick to be sent back, and others who were mentally disturbed by their relatives being sent back. Waldheim was visibly shocked by the story. After that, he was taken to the Technical Centre, where Sarun gave a "welcoming" speech. In his speech he explained the situation in Cambodia which had forced many thousands of Cambodians to flee across the border into Thailand. He talked about the relatives of the people who had been sent back, and he requested Waldheim to plead with third countries to open their doors to the Cambodian refugees before many more of them died. Waldheim, in replying to Sarun's speech, said that he was very concerned with what was going on and that he would take it up with Prime Minister Kriangsak that evening. Later, Panita amazed everyone by running up to the UN Secretary General, smiling and making friends with him, resulting in a great photo opportunity for the journalists.

The day showed the world what had been, and still was, going on. The Thai authorities were not happy with how the visit had transpired, and from then on it became very difficult for Sarun to work within the camp. His requests for permission to go outside the camp were denied, and the camp became a prison for him. There were strong indications that the Thai authorities were going to try and move Sarun and Peng Sy either to a third country or to another camp. On Monday morning 14th May, I received a phone call from UNHCR to say that the authorisation for the visas had come through to the Embassy that morning. The Embassy seemed very surprised at the speed of approval!

I returned to Bangkok late that evening and on Tuesday morning I went over to the UNHCR office to discuss the procedure to be adopted to get Var and family out of Thailand. Discussions took some time as we went through the different options. We decided it was best not to put them on a regular list as this would draw attention to them, and their transfer to Bangkok would probably be blocked by the District Officer. The UNHCR Field Officer for the Bangkok Transit Centre suggested that we bring the family quietly to Bangkok, and then surrender them to the Immigration Authorities, who would process them as illegal entrants. As long as the entry visas into the U.K. were approved in advance and we had the plane tickets, then Immigration would simply send them to the court, where they would be fined for entering Thailand illegally, and then deported. Agreeing that this was the best way to tackle things, I left to meet the British Embassy officials to inform them about the plan. I saw them

briefly and they agreed to the procedure, saying that they would co-operate in every way possible with the issuing of the entry visas and travel documents.

So it seemed that we had sorted out the documentation aspects in Bangkok, and there remained only the fairly large problem of how to get the family to Bangkok. Since the influx of new refugees across the Khmer/Thai border, including ethnic Chinese, the Thai authorities had set up many check-points between Aranya Prathet and Bangkok in an effort to stem the smuggling of refugees from the border into Bangkok. On Wednesday morning, 16th May, I returned to Aranya Prathet and had to stop at a checkpoint, where they checked my papers and the car. Things were tightening up, and it was beginning to look as though we might have a real problem.

We had tentatively arranged with UNHCR, ICEM and the British Embassy that we would aim for Thursday, May 24th, as the departure date. ICEM were going ahead and booking the tickets, and the British Embassy was preparing a letter to Immigration for the family. That meant that I had to get them to Bangkok by Monday at the latest in order to have enough time to arrange all the departure papers. Time was getting short, and with all the checkpoints along the road, it didn't seem to be possible.

On Friday, 18th May, I returned to Bangkok and was stopped at several check-points along the way. Things indeed looked bleak. I called UNHCR to let them know that there were a few problems still to be sorted out, and it might be necessary to delay the departure date. I had intended to return to Aranya Prathet on the Saturday to really check into the possibilities of getting the family to Bangkok. However, my sister phoned from Korat to say that her car had broken down. I had asked her to come to Bangkok to meet Roy, one of our visiting committee members, and take him to visit the camp in Surin. I didn't want to leave Bangkok until she had arrived, and she finally got to Bangkok at 6.30 p.m. in the evening.

The following morning Roy and I left for Aranya Prathet, arriving there at 1.30 p.m. I went straight to the camp and talked to Sarun. He told me that the Americans had offered to take him and Peng Sy, as well as Var's family to America. I explained to him that the Americans would still have the same problem as the British in getting Var and family out of the camp, and that we should stick with the UK unless that proved to be not possible. I felt that we must make a move soon or else something could happen to the family due to the volatility of the situation. The only other option was the train, and I decided that we should try that, as I had a feeling that the train was not checked in the same way as road vehicles. I asked one of the volunteers if she would go on the train early on Monday morning to check it out. She would have to return the same day by bus to give me the detailed answer. She agreed to go and on Monday morning I was up at 4.50 a.m. to take her to the railway station, as the train was due to leave at 5.30 a.m. I felt that secrecy was essential and so I told no-one, not even Roy, about my plans. After the train had departed, I returned home to sleep some more. At breakfast, the rest of the team asked where the volunteer was, and I simply replied that she had gone out already to do some work. At the camp that morning, I discussed the situation with Sarun, and told him that someone was checking the train to see if there were any checks. If all went well, then we would move the following morning. I tried to think ahead to cover all the angles, and

I felt it would be better to split the family on the train, since a small group of people would be less noticeable than a large group. I asked Sarun to take Vyada and Somaly as they would look like a small family. Sarun spoke fluent Thai, so he could cover for them, but we needed someone else to look after Var and Panita. I decided to approach Sambat, our English and Batik teacher. He also spoke fluent Thai, and would be able to converse with Var in English on the train. Courageously, he agreed to help. I warned them all that no-one should speak Khmer. Sambat and Var should speak in English and Sarun and Da could speak in French. That only left the children. To have them chattering away in Khmer would be a dead give-away. We therefore decided to give them a small portion of a sleeping tablet, so that they would sleep the whole journey.

I discussed the whole process with Sarun and Sambat, and then all we could do was wait for word from the volunteer as to whether it was safe or not. I went to see the hospital nurse, who supplied me with the necessary sleeping tablets for the children. Then I returned to the house in the afternoon to wait for news from the volunteer. At 4.50 p.m. my sister phoned from Bangkok to say that she had been given a message to pass on to me. The message was simply "OK". My sister was slightly puzzled by it, but I didn't bother to enlighten her! My spirits lifted as I felt the time had come. I went straight to the camp and told Sarun, Sambat and Var that we would move the next day. I arranged to meet them along the road outside the camp at 4.45 a.m. the following morning, and I would take them to catch the train. I warned them not to tell the children anything in case they went to say goodbye to friends, and then the secret would be out – just to wake them up the following morning and take them out of the camp. I gave the sleeping tablets to Var and instructed her on the dosage, etc. Then we quietly loaded their bags into my car for me to take to Bangkok. I went back into Aranya Prathet and found the volunteer, who had returned on the bus – slightly tired!

I was out for supper that evening and got to bed after midnight. However, I was awakened at 3.00 a.m. by the sound of heavy rain. I groaned and thought of the difficulty that the family would have walking out of the camp across the fields in the mud. I stayed awake until 4.30 a.m., when I got up. As I was dressing, Roy woke up and I told him it was time for us to leave for Bangkok. While he was dressing, I slipped out of the house and drove to the camp. I met the whole group waiting by the side of the road. They had just arrived from the camp, after struggling under the barbed wire fence and across the fields. I loaded them into the car and drove into Aranya Prathet. I stopped some way from the station, as I didn't want anyone to report that I had been seen dropping people off at the station. They walked along the tracks to the ticket office and Sarun bought the tickets. The others waited in the shadows until the last minute before boarding the train.

Meanwhile, I returned to the house to collect Roy and we left at 6.00 a.m. for Bangkok. On the journey Roy asked if I thought we could get them to Bangkok in time for the flight on the 24th, which was only 2 days away. I replied that I was sure something would work out. Shortly after we passed through Wattana Nakhon, we passed the train and I wondered how they were getting on. We arrived in Bangkok before 9.00 a.m. and I dropped Roy off for my sister to take him to Surin. I went round to the ICRC office and had a quiet word with the delegate in charge. I informed him that the family was on its way to Bangkok and, if there

were any problems, I would be calling on him for his assistance. He said he would help in any way possible. I went back to the house at 12.30 p.m. and found that they had all arrived safely, having taken a taxi from the station. I was elated to see them, and they described their journey to me – how some police had got on at Wattana Nakhon and they had all pretended to be asleep. Sarun had mentally prepared a cover story in case they were questioned, but they were not disturbed and everything turned out OK.

At 2.00 p.m. that afternoon I took them all to the British Embassy. I went in to see the Consul, and he gave me visa application forms for them to fill in. I completed each of the forms and they signed them, and then the Consular staff began preparing the identity documents with Entry Visas. We finally finished at 4.00 p.m. and I whisked them off to ICEM. They had received a cable from Geneva telling them to book Var and family for Thursday, 24th May, so they were getting a little worried as to where the family was. I gave him the identity papers and UK entry visas, and he said he would get on with preparing the exit visas, but that we must present the family to Immigration the following morning. On the way home, we stopped at the Central Department Store to buy clothes for them all.

The next day, Wednesday, 23rd May, we were all up at 5.00 a.m. talking about the day's plans. Var and Vyada packed, and we put their things into the car. Then we all drove down to the Immigration Detention Centre, where we met the UNHCR Field Officer. He took us in to meet the Chief of the Illegal Entry Section. We left Sarun and Sambat outside to avoid any awkward questions.

I recognised the Chief as being the same man who threw me out of the Transit Centre two years previously, so I was a little apprehensive. However, he didn't seem to recognise me, and was quite pleasant. We had to go from office to office while reports were typed. Var was questioned closely about her entry into Thailand. Mario had told her she must say that she had entered Thailand only a few days before. If she said she had come in 2 or 3 months ago, they would have been angry that she had not surrendered herself before. There was one bad moment when the officer making the report asked her how she travelled to Bangkok. She replied "By train". He didn't hear her reply and asked her if she had to pay any money, meaning – did she pay any money to get through the checkpoints. She thought, of course, that he was asking her if she had paid money for the train ticket, and so replied "Yes". This caused quite a commotion as the officer called all his friends over and tried to ask her how much money she had paid at the checkpoints. At that point I intervened and explained the misunderstanding. Calm returned and the interrogation continued. At 11.30 a.m. they told us to go away for lunch and come back at 12.30 to go to the court. The Chief had already said that if ICEM appeared in the afternoon with all the travel documents, then there was no need for the family to stay overnight in the Immigration Prison. I couldn't believe it. We had been certain that they would have to stay at the prison that night until the official deportation.

We ate lunch and then returned to Immigration. There were a few other foreigners there who had overstayed their visas and who had to go to court to pay a fine. Two officials accompanied us all. I was allowed to take Var and family in my car and we drove over to Sanam Luang where the court was. We sat and waited and then one of the officials came to

ask Sarun to translate for the court. Sarun was greatly amused that he, a refugee, should be asked to act as official court interpreter. Eventually the family was called before the court, and the judge didn't even ask them any questions. He simply said that they should not have entered Thailand illegally, and pronounced a fine of Bt. 1,600 each for Var and Vyada. After paying the fine we returned to Immigration where we had to wait a long time for the various forms to be signed by the Immigration Officers. Finally, we were told to report back at the Chief's office where we were given all the papers: Identity Documents, UK Entry Visas, Thai exit visas, and plane tickets. We trooped thankfully out of the building at 4.45 p.m. and returned home. That evening I had to have supper with the British Consul, and I didn't get in until midnight. I placed a call to England to say that the family would definitely be arriving on Friday morning.

Thursday, 24th May, dawned - the great day. I was up at 5.00 a.m. to go to meet Roy off the train from Surin. I told him briefly that we had changed his ticket and that he would be leaving with the family the same night. He seemed surprised, but took it all in his stride. Later I took the family back to Immigration to have their cholera and smallpox vaccinations. I had mine done as well to show the children it didn't hurt. We then drove to ICEM where Var and Vyada had to sign promissory notes. ICEM insisted that a medical exam was necessary, and they assigned a nurse to accompany us to the Bangkok General Hospital. There they did tests, which included eye tests. Somaly stood and read out the numbers on the board. She got muddled up between English and Thai numbers, which had everyone roaring with laughter. Eventually the tests were finished and we took the nurse back to ICEM. Back at the house Var and Vyada packed and repacked everything. We ate an early supper and then everyone crammed into the car and we drove to the airport, arriving there at 6.35 p.m. An ICEM officer was waiting there for us, and he checked all the papers through Passport Control. At 8.00 p.m. they all had to go through to Departure Lounge. The children were sad to say goodbye to us all, but it was a relief to see them finally pass through into the Departure Lounge on their way to safety.

It had been an exhausting several days, and I was almost asleep by then. However, we had to drive to Aranya Prathet that night, as it was essential to get Sarun and Sambat back into the camp at night. If they went in by day they would probably be noticed. We left the airport at 8.45 p.m., and I managed to get 30 kms past Chachoengsao before I had to stop and sleep for 30 minutes. We stopped in Kabinburi because we saw a convoy of buses. It turned out that they were new refugees being taken to the Bangkok Transit Centre for processing to third countries. Sarun and Sambat talked to the people for a while and then bought some fruit, which they fed to me for the rest of the journey to keep me awake. We were stopped at several check-points but they were perfunctory checks as the real checks were on those going towards Bangkok. We arrived in Aranya Prathet at 1.00 a.m. and I took Sarun and Sambat straight to the camp. Dropping them off a safe distance, they walked off across the fields to enter through the fence.

At 9.30 a.m. the next morning, Friday 25th May, I went to see the District Officer. I had decided it was best for me to tell him half the story before he heard the whole story from

someone else and came gunning for me. I simply told him that I had met some of his refugees in Bangkok, that I had handed them over to the Immigration Police, who had sent them to the Court; the Court had fined them and they had been deported from Thailand. He asked who they were and, when I told him their names and that they had gone to England, he became a little suspicious. However, he realised that the “illegal” problem for him was now solved, and a smile crossed his face as he said, "OK -- forget it. It's finished".

A miracle had taken place. From 11 March to 24 May – a period of some ten weeks – a family had escaped the horrors of Cambodia, survived anthrax, remained safe from the fear of a forcible push-back to Cambodia, overcome the bureaucratic hurdles for resettlement, and were safe in a new country. It had never happened before – and it was all due to the combined efforts of those in UNHCR, ICRC, ICEM, the Home Office, the British Embassy, the Christian Outreach volunteers, Sarun and Sambat – and a number of Thai officials who wanted to help a family in need. If proof was ever needed that God can still work miracles, this was it.

Robert Ashe
1979