During the 1970s and ‘80s there was a huge influx of emigration from Southeast Asia. The Vietnam War, the Khmer Rouge genocide, and the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia drove hundreds of thousands of refugees to flee their countries and seek safety in other nations. In the mid to late ‘70s many Cambodians fled to huge refugee camps on the border between Thailand and Cambodia. These camps were overcrowded, devoid of food, and prone to Khmer Rouge attacks, and many refugees looked to the United States as a possible safe haven. Immigration services and programs in the U.S. worked to bring over these Southeast Asian refugees and ease their adaptation to their new life. They used a number of different techniques to increase the services they could provide and the number of immigrants they could admit.

In 1960, immigrants to the U.S. from Southeast Asian countries were 6% of the total. By 1970, that percent had doubled to 12%, and by 1980, 35% of immigrants coming to the U.S. were from a Southeast Asian country. By the end of the Cold War, “the most recently arrived Asian groups were the Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese, admitted as political refugees….” Part of the reason so many Southeast Asian immigrants were able to move to the U.S. was because of the changes that the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 created in the immigration and naturalization system. This act abolished the system of quotas for different countries, and established a limitation on Western Hemisphere immigration. There were also changes added to allow immigrants to sponsor their relatives to come to the U.S. Additional

family immigration was not counted as part of the quota, thus may Southeast Asians who were already established in the U.S. could more easily bring their relatives over.

Because of this huge increase in immigrants and change in the types of people immigrating, services arose throughout the United States to provide support. These groups came in all shapes and sizes, and were designed to support immigrants in a multitude of ways. One specific group, the Cambodian Crisis Committee (CCC), was based in Amherst, Massachusetts, and had connections with immigrant assistance programs all over the U.S. The Cambodian Crisis Committee did a range of things from family reunification, to petitioning Congress, to organizing events for traditional Khmer holidays.\(^3\) A large part of the committee’s work was to open up more spots for Cambodian immigrants to come to the U.S., and to do this they made ties with many other immigration programs. Many of them were churches that used their large congregations to provide an already established community for Cambodian immigrants. There were seven churches in Western Massachusetts that hosted Cambodian families in the early 1980’s, and these communities assisted each other in supporting these Cambodian families. Some of these were the Amherst North and South Congregationalist churches, the Methodist church, Lutheran church, and Quaker church. These strongly supported helping immigrants because it fit into their general belief that it is their duty to share the suffering of the world.\(^4\)

The CCC worked very hard to educate its American volunteers about the culture and history of the Cambodian people so they would feel more comfortable with the Americans. The committee wrote out long manuals on the fundamentals of the Khmer language and the basic

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\(^3\) Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 3, Arrivals folder, Special Collections and University Archives

\(^4\) Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 3, Lutheran Service Association of New England folder.
vocabulary to communicate with Cambodians. One packet was called the “Khmer Mini-Course” and was created for use by the CCC volunteers who would first greet the Cambodian immigrants at the airport. Basic airport and transportation vocabulary was translated, such as “Hello, how are you?” or, “When did you arrive?” Other handbooks were created and widely distributed to CCC workers and the townspeople of Amherst, which detailed Khmer history and culture. One manual, entitled “Cambodian Culture” was only two pages long and gave brief information which would help the townspeople understand their new neighbors. This included information on the Cambodians’ religion, Buddhism, family structures, and values. For example, customs and accepted public actions are explained in a short informational packet:

To show their respect, Cambodians will bow their head in front of a superior or an elderly; kissing in public is not acceptable; up to three or four generations live together in one home; spiritualism is dominant in the society; man is supposed to live in harmony with nature, not to dominate nature; Cambodians seldom express openly their true feelings of and emotions, except between very close friends or relatives; time is flexible, there is no need to be in a hurry or punctual except in extremely important cases.

The guidelines of Khmer society mentioned above are just some of the long list of cultural norms. These are explained in a simple manner so that the Americans who interact with the new immigrants are not surprised or offended by the Cambodians’ actions.

One of the key elements of the CCC was to introduce the new arrivals to American culture while not losing the original Khmer heritage through assimilation. This was done with informational packets, as well as multi-day conferences held throughout the state, which CCC

5 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 2 Refugee Resource #2 folder.
6 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 2 “Khmer Mini-Course,” S.L. Stryker, Khmer History and Culture folder.
7 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 2 “Cambodian Culture,” Khmer History and Culture folder.
8 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 2 “Cambodian Culture,” Khmer History and Culture folder.
volunteers would attend. At Smith College in March of 1983, members of the CCC attended the Simon S. Shargo Memorial Conference, which educated attendees about the problems of acculturation, government selection of refugees allowed to resettle in the U.S., and improving public services for refugees.  

This two-day conference held lectures taught by people with extensive experience in government departments dealing with immigration and naturalization, as well as psychologists and sociologists who have studied immigration patterns and difficulties.

The committee also reached out to people in different professions who would be interacting frequently with the Cambodian immigrants. For example, the committee organization created a “Guidebook for Teaching Cambodian Children” for schoolteachers. Also, the CCC worked closely with the Lutheran Services Association of New England, and took advantage of various workshops they held. A conference in February 1985 entitled “Southeast Asian Refugees in the Pioneer Valley” offered discussion and remedies for problems such as “community physical and mental health issues, community school and adult education issues, and community social and cultural issues.”

This workshop offered assistance to future employers and educators of Cambodian immigrants on how to better understand their backgrounds and certain hurdles that could arise which the Pioneer Valley residents would not be used to. Similar to this conference was the Boston University School of Social Work’s Southeast Asian Training Program. The objectives of this conference were to “provide information about the experiences and trauma associated with being a refugee; to differentiate the cultures of the Cambodian, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Hmong societies; to deepen understanding of specific problems and services needed

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9 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 2 Counseling Programs folder, March 1983.
10 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 2 “Guidebook for Teaching Cambodian Children,” Khmer History and Culture folder.
11 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 “Southeast Asian Refugees in the Pioneer Valley,” February 1985, Conferences, Programs, Workshops folder.
for refugees; and to build linkages among the participants which will increase their knowledge of and access to resources and services.” Immigrants were not only faced with the shocking experience of moving to an entirely new home and life, but they had to deal with their harrowing experiences during the genocide. Cambodians had to quickly learn how to cope with the difficulties of living in a new environment while simultaneously trying not to be consumed by their memories from the Khmer Rouge reign. This training program was also geared towards educating future employers about possible education, psychological, and employment needs the Cambodian refugees may have.

Once the Cambodian Crisis Committee workers and the Amherst community were prepared for the immigrants to arrive, workers would pick up the Cambodian refugees at Bradley International Airport, then bring them back to Amherst. These immigrants were settled into their new homes or apartments, which the committee rented and furnished mostly with the help of donations.

A testimony of each immigrant’s experience after fleeing his or her home in Cambodian was then recorded with the help of a translator. While these testimonies are only a few pages long, their simplicity does not hide the hardships, sacrifices, and suffering many of the immigrants have gone through to get to the United States. Read alongside Loung Ung’s *First They Killed My Father*, what is left out of the immigrants’ testimonies can be inferred from reading Ung’s story about her family’s experience during the Khmer Rouge reign.

One specific case was that of Thoun Ros, a Cambodian woman living in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp in Thailand after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. Thoun and her family had

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12 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 “Boston University Southeast Asian Training Program,” Conferences, Programs, Workshops folder.
13 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 4 “Affidavit,” Approved/Waiting folder, December 1986.
already been rejected once for immigration to Columbus, Ohio, where a large part of her family was living. Lynn Glenn, the daughter of the astronaut John Glenn, took a strong interest in the plight of the Cambodians, and called Elaine Kenseth-Abel to inquire helping the Ros family. She called the CCC, and Abel told her to have the family fill out the affidavits required by the Embassy.\textsuperscript{14} Testimonies from three different family members were written and sent in December 1986 to the Department of Immigration and Naturalization Services, in the hopes that these testimonies would convince the government that Thoun Ros and her family were not Khmer Rouge while in Cambodia.

A brief, general outline of Thoun Ros and her family’s life histories are given in no more than two pages by her sister, Thorn Ros, her brother, Hir Ros, and her mother, Thearm Phoung. These accounts were given in Khmer then translated into English by an English-speaking Cambodians. Each describes the family’s simple existence before the Khmer Rouge takeover, and Pol Pot’s reign. They were rural farmers who had little education, and suffered greatly under the Khmer Rouge. None of the family members go into detail about their day-to-day lives under the Khmer Rouge in their testimonies, and it is unclear if this is due to their lack of space to record their testimonies, or their lack of desire to speak about these horrible years. From Ung’s book about her life under the Khmer Rouge, it is can be understood that Thoun Ros and her family would have been forced to do hard labor everyday, which they mention consisted of “very difficult farm and irrigation work.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} Interview with Elaine Kenseth-Abel, November 30, 2010
\textsuperscript{15} Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 4 “Affidavit,” Approved/Waiting folder, December 1986.
In Thorn Ros’s testimony, she mentioned that the family was “separated from each other for about a year until after the harvest of 1976. Then our farm labor groups were dissolved.” It is surprising to read such a blunt statement after learning the details of camp life from Ung’s book, because Ung goes into vivid detail about the hardships of camp life. It is unclear what caused the dissolution of the labor groups: it could have been internal Khmer Rouge struggles, the threat of invasion from the Vietnamese, or any other number of reasons. This lack of information also could imply that Thorn Ros and her family were not informed of the reason for important decisions such as these. Shown here is the tremendous lack of involvement or information of the ordinary Cambodian citizen in the workings of the regime in power. It also shows how little outside information and news the Cambodian people were receiving, because the only way for them to measure time was by the harvests. They were acutely aware of what was going on around them, and could infer the broad Khmer Rouge situation from their observations, but the only news passed on to the laborers was the propaganda from Pol Pot. The villagers were never told of the losses and heavy casualties inflicted on the Khmer Rouge by the attacking Vietnamese.

The testimonies lack any overt sign of emotion because they are so short and to the point. If not read carefully, one would overlook the horror that these people endured to survive and flee the country to safety, which is either missing in the translation, or hidden between the lines.

Thoun Ros’s mother, TheArm Phoung, states in one sentence that at the beginning of Pol Pot’s reign in 1975, her husband and her daughter’s husband were immediately taken away by the

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16 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 4 “Affidavit,” Approved/Waiting folder, December 1986.
Khmer Rouge and killed. The Khmer are superstitious, spiritual people, who would have wanted a proper burial and mourning ceremony for their murdered family members, but the bluntness with which the statement is written alludes to the everyday horror of life under the Khmer Rouge. Like Ung’s family members who died during the Khmer Rouge reign, Thoun Ros and her family most likely did not have time to mourn their loved ones in the way they would have liked. Family was an extremely important aspect of Khmer culture, and the Khmer Rouge worked to eliminate the family structure to create a communist state.

Another passage in Thearm’s testimony hints at the conditions of their lives: “During this time I actually saw my daughters usually when they were sent by their camp leaders to the ‘hospital’ in Svay Donkeo.” The reason the word “hospital” is in quotations is because the hospitals under the Khmer Rouge can barely be considered hospitals; they are better described at warehouses of death. Workers would be sent here if their camp leader thought they were close to death, and could not efficiently work anymore. In these “hospitals” patients were put in beds or on the floor, and given a small ration of food and a piece of sugar as medicine. Doctors did not treat them, because the Khmer Rouge had murdered most already for being educated bourgeoisie. Therefore, people were sent to hospitals mostly to die. In the case of Thearm Phoung’s daughters, they were lucky enough to be able to rest and gain strength in these large warehouses.

At the end of each testimony, the family member reiterates the purpose of the account, which is to show that Thorn Ros and her family were not Khmer Rouge because they were with the rest of the family for the majority of the time. They all mention how it is “not fair that we

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17 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 4 “Affidavit,” Approved/Waiting folder, December 1986.
18 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 4 “Affidavit,” Approved/Waiting folder, December 1986.
[the family] were allowed to come to the U.S. and they were not,” because they “had the same type of experiences and persecution.”¹⁹ They should not be treated differently because the Khmer Rouge treated them in the same horrible way they treated the other Cambodian people. These testimonies are the proof that Thoun Ros and her family should be accepted for immigration to the United States just like her family was before her.

The Cambodian Crisis Committee worked with a local churches after the first Cambodian family, the Soms, arrived in 1982. This family arrived in March of ’82, a few months before the committee was planning on receiving them. Only with a large amount of community involvement were the CCC and South Church able to prepare a house, jobs, and schooling for all twelve members of the family. Long lists of items were created to make sure the Soms had everything they needed once they arrived in Amherst. Long-term planning also took place, because it is important to immigrant assistance groups to prepare the immigrants to be self-sufficient as soon as possible.²⁰ This quick but thorough planning helped the CCC prepare learn what Cambodia immigrants families would need in the future. The CCC learned to check up on all the immigrants frequently, and ask about relatives they have still in refugee camps in Thailand and Cambodia. This facilitated forms being sent to families to list the immigration status of their family members so the CCC could help them immigrate to the U.S. faster and cheaper.²¹

The CCC also worked with the Lutheran Service Association to establish therapy and training services, which would train therapists on how to deal with the Cambodian immigrants’

¹⁹ Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 4 “Affidavit,” Approved/Waiting folder, December 1986.
²⁰ Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 1 South Church Cambodian Resettlement Project Committee folder.
²¹ Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 3 Arrivals folder.
issues, which would be new to these psychiatrists. A subgroup called the Lutheran Family
Services offered therapy services to these new immigrant families, as well as information on
what “gifts” the Khmer people would be bringing to the people already here. The Service teaches
that “while refugees arrive in the United States with little or no material possessions, they bring
with them rich cultural heritages.”22 The Cambodian people brought with them an understanding
of Khmer culture and religion, which were very different from American culture. These people
had a cultural history in Southeast Asia which stretched over a thousand years, including
constant interactions with the Hmong, Vietnamese, Thai, and Chinese people. Elaine Kenseth-
Abel describes in an interview that the Cambodian people who came to Amherst in 1982 taught
them about family and a different way to live their lives. Even though these people had been
through a holocaust, they never lost their close family bonds, and the importance of maintaining
these bonds. They hated to be separated from their relatives, and felt that if one family member
was left behind in the Thai camps, none of them should be safe in the U.S. These Cambodians
also taught the Amherst townspeople to enjoy every day, and not worry too much about planning
for the future. Cambodian culture does not stress being punctual and rigid, but enjoying each
other’s company, and taking leisure time.23 The Lutheran Services Association and CCC felt it
was important to remind Americans that their job was not to mix these Cambodian people into
the melting pot, but to learn from their Khmer culture and add these new traditions and insights
to their own.

While assisting already immigrated Cambodians in the U.S. was one of the main
functions of immigration assistance groups, the CCC also worked hard to affect immigration

22 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 2 “Gifts of the Khmer People,” Counseling
Programs folder.
23 Interview with Elaine Kenseth-Abel, November 30, 2010.
through legislature. This was a very crucial job, because there were only five nations (U.S., Canada, France, New Zealand, and Australia, with Norway and Switzerland accepting only children) accepting Cambodian refugees, so it was important to bring over as many refugees as possible. The committee would make a “Call to Action” if it felt Congress was going to pass a bill that limited the number of Southeast Asian immigrants. A 1983 “Call to Action” came in response to the State Department’s Refugee Program’s decision to put a cap on Southeast Asian refugee immigration.\textsuperscript{24} The committee sent fliers to as many advocates of Southeast Asian immigration as possible, calling on people to contact specific Congressmen, urging them to vote in favor of bills that supported immigrants. This advocacy update also outlined the CCC’s plan to set up a full-time ministry in Thailand from August 1, 1984 to December 31, 1984. The purpose of this ministry was to aid the Thai government in processing the thousands of refugees in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp, so as many people as possible could immigrate to the United States. The six month effort was important because the Thai government decided that by 1985 they would dissolve Khao-I-Dang, and send everyone back to Cambodia who had not already gone to the U.S. The committee’s main focus in its Thailand ministry would be “family reunification cases, unaccompanied minors, the identification of new evidence for rejected cases on hold, identification of and advocacy for cultural leaders.”\textsuperscript{25} The other main reason for setting up a CCC ministry in Thailand was to encourage direct visits to Thailand by sponsors, congressional leaders, volunteer agencies, churches, and other people interested in aiding Cambodian refugees. This rented building would offer these people a place to stay so as to make their travel arrangements easier.

\textsuperscript{24} Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 3 Call to Action 1 folder.
\textsuperscript{25} Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box *4 “Advocacy Update” Call to Action 1 folder, October 1984.
The May 1985 call to action was very successful in achieving its goal. One reason for this was the large amount of Cambodian immigrants who traveled to the capitol to sit in on a congressional hearing regarding Southeast Asian immigration. Their presence made more concrete the notion of helping Southeast Asian refugees have a better life in the U.S. Articles in the *Washington Post* followed the Congressional hearing and reported a victory on behalf of the advocates of expanding Southeast Asian immigration.26

As a part of every advocacy update or call to action, the CCC attached a donation sheet, where individuals and organizations could contribute anywhere from five dollars to over a thousand dollars to committee. The organization was nonprofit, and it depended mostly on donations from individuals and other organizations, especially churches. Many times the CCC volunteers themselves would have to pay out of their own pocket to fund trips or conferences.27

The CCC cited trips to Thailand as one of their most important advocacy operations, and they encouraged anyone who had the funds to make the trip to see the refugee camps.28 One example of a crucial trip to Thailand was the April 1983 trip, which was sponsored by the Lutheran Service Association. Elaine Kenseth-Abel, one of the key people running the CCC, was interviewed in the *Amherst Record* about this upcoming trip. Approximately “20-30 religious leaders and lay persons from New England and other sections of the country will be making the trip.”29 Abel explained that there was a sense of urgency to this trip because “the one Cambodian

27 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box *4 “Advocacy Update” Call to Action 1 folder, October 1984.
28 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box *4 “Advocacy Update” Call to Action 1 folder, October 1984.
29 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box *4 “Amherst woman to witness Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand,” Phyllis Lehrer, Trip to Thailand folder, March 30, 1983.
refugee camp in Thailand is slated to close this year.” As the Amherst representative on the trip, Abel explained that it was very important to her and the immigrant families she represented to make contact with separated family members, and expedite their immigration process. This was Abel’s first trip to the Thai refugee camps, so its objective was to get a full understanding of how the camps were run, and discover the most efficient way to process and refugees for immigration to a safe country. This was certainly achieved, and the CCC volunteers came back with more than enough information about the inner workings of Khao-I-Dang, the Thai police force and government, and the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. Similar to the advocacy updates, a paragraph at the end of the articles reiterated the need for donations toward this trip.

An ally of the CCC, the Lutheran Service Association of New England similarly used the technique of writing to Congress to advocate for Southeast Asian immigration. The Association also put together a large workshop on October 7, 1983 called “Refugee Concern Sunday.” This event was created to “celebrate and support our refugee community, learn about refugee needs, and plan new sponsorship opportunities.” The workshop attracted people from churches all over western Massachusetts to learn about the growing new community of Southeast Asian immigrants. Church communities were one of the main sources of volunteers and donations to the CCC for a number of reasons, but one distinct reason is that these religious people felt the duty help other human beings in need. A handout from the Lutheran Service Association explained the purpose of the 1983 trip to Thailand. There were citations from the gospels, which

30 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box *4 “Amherst woman to witness Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand.”
31 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 1, Refugee Concern Sunday folder.
compared Jesus’ burden of helping other people in need with the responsibility each member of the congregation to help the Cambodian refugees.\textsuperscript{32}

While there were many groups and communities who supported these new immigrants, there were also substantial pockets of people, especially in large cities, who did not care about the welfare of immigrants, and took advantage of them. Sometimes the Southeast Asians would get ripped off financially and end up paying huge sums of money for free services, other times the apartments of these people were broken into and robbed. This was largely an effect of the new immigrants deciding to move to a few locations in the U.S. as opposed to spreading out throughout the country, as the government had initially wanted. In 1980, “one in every 200 Californians was a Southeast Asian refugee.”\textsuperscript{33} The flood of immigrants in 1980 was due in large part to President Carter’s doubling of the Southeast Asian immigrant quota in 1979: refugees began arriving 14,000 per month, and by September of that year over 415,000 refugees from Southeast Asia has become permanent residents of the U.S. These increasing immigrant communities attracted attention to those desiring to take advantage of them, and yet the threat of exploitation did not deter Southeast Asians from moving to the warm California climate and to cities where there were already a large number of Indochinese.\textsuperscript{34}

An article in a west coast magazine called \textit{New West} highlighted these exploitations of the newcomers to the U.S. This article, “Yearning to Breathe Free,” pointed out different types of manipulation, yet all of these stemmed from the Southeast Asian person’s desire to reunite their family. Many were not aware of free services like the CCC that offered assistance in

\textsuperscript{32} Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box *4 “What is the Ministry of Going to Thailand?” Trip to Thailand folder, April 19, 1983.
\textsuperscript{33} Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 1, “Yearning to Breathe Free,” Jeffrey Kaye, \textit{New West}, April 7, 1980, 57.
\textsuperscript{34} Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 1, “Yearning to Breathe Free,” Jeffrey Kaye, \textit{New West}, April 7, 1980, 58.
reuniting refugees. Instead, new immigrants would seek out attorneys to get visas for their relatives, not knowing how experienced the attorney was in immigration law. A new immigrant would have no knowledge of how to choose a proper attorney, and decisions were often made based on the look of the lawyer’s advertisement in a local newspaper, or by flipping randomly through the yellow pages. One instance cited in the article details the struggle of two sisters trying to bring the rest of their family to California. They paid an initial $2,500 to two attorneys who said they would try to bring their relatives over from Vietnam, and another $2,500 was promised them once the relatives had migrated. The lawyers could not attain the visas, and ended up referring the sisters to a nonprofit immigration assistance agency which was able to bring the family over for free. The sisters never got their $2,500 back.35

There are also countless accounts of people promising to help reunite families with their ties to unnamed foreign contacts, yet the families are almost never brought together via these people. Refugees were also abused at their jobs, where they were sometimes paid only three dollars an hour, and sometimes not paid at all in the first weeks of their job when the employers insisted the workers “get used to the machine or equipment”36 before getting paid. Like many new immigrant communities in U.S. history, this manipulation and unfair treatment can lead to violence and the formation of ethnic gangs. The Southeast Asian refugees have not been left out of this trend, and gangs were formed in west coast and east coast cities.37

Southeast Asian refugees also ran into problems on the east coast, especially in large cities such as New York City. A New York Times article brings to light the violence directed

35 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 1, “Yearning to Breathe Free,” Jeffrey Kaye, New West, April 7, 1980, 61.
36 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 1, “Yearning to Breathe Free,” Jeffrey Kaye, New West, April 7, 1980, 61.
37 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 1, “Yearning to Breathe Free,” Jeffrey Kaye, New West, April 7, 1980, 69.
toward these new immigrants.\textsuperscript{38} An area in Brooklyn has a concentrated population of Cambodians who are constantly robbed, mugged, and harassed by the other people living in the area, because the Cambodians come across as weak and naïve, therefore easily exploitable. Cambodian refugees have had to be resettled in suburban or rural towns, which prove safer for the families to live in compared to inner city, urban areas.

The concerned people at South Congregational Church in Amherst, MA knew of the hardships that Cambodians went through after emigrating from Thailand, and they committed to sponsoring a family of twelve (eventually three more relatives joined them) to immigrate to Amherst in March 1983 to live in a safe, caring environment. This was decided in 1982, before the Cambodian Crisis Committee was created. The church community went to great lengths to prepare for the arrival of the Som family. A meeting was held on November 23, 1982 to decide what was needed for the family’s arrival. The meeting’s “particular focus will be on the objective of moving the Som family toward the goal of self-sufficiency by next September (1983),” mentioned Elaine Kenseth-Abel.\textsuperscript{39} The South Church Resettlement Project, as it was called at the time, created a detailed description of each member of the Som family, which included two parents, eight children, one daughter-in-law, and one grandson. The Project broke up its tasks into three phases: Phase I (planning), Phase II (arrival and transition), and Phase III (Ongoing Support Services).\textsuperscript{40} These Amherst townspeople were committing to years of support, because they knew that they could not neglect the Som family once they reached Amherst. The Project understood its future challenges:

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\item \textsuperscript{38} Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 1, “Vigil,” The New York Times, March 21, 1983.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 1, “South Congregational Church,” Preparations folder, November 23, 1982.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 1, “South Congregational Church,” Preparations folder, November 23, 1982.
\end{itemize}
“A household with eight children, seven of them school age, by definition, is always in motion, is always fully scheduled, always involved. Add to the needs of a large family in America, the needs of a large Southeast Asian family trying to resettle in America, and one has added the complexities of the yin/yang, east/west, and cultural transitions. The picture changes considerably when the family is a refugee family…. Coming to America for Khmer refugee is like coming to another planet.”

There were lists in the packet about the immediate and long term needs of the family, regarding services, transportation, finding employment, plans for the Christmas holidays, donations, and education opportunities. There was also an extensive list of economic needs, and how much everything would cost. The church found a two-story, four-bedroom ranch for the Som family to live in, and arranged for a low rent with the cooperative landlord. Other economic requirements included the cost of English language classes, job training for the father and oldest son, utilities, and household items. There was also a list of ways to help meet these economic needs including fundraisers, the HCAC fuel assistance program, and scholarships.

In an interview with Elaine Kenseth-Abel, who in 1983 had just started learning about Cambodian refugees, she mentioned how this extensive preparation for the Som family’s arrival was more than they were able to do later for any other Cambodian immigrant family. The Som’s house was fully furnished when they arrived, jobs at Atkins Farm were waiting the father and the oldest brother, medical examinations including eye exams and dentist appointments were arranged upon the Som’s arrival, daily tutoring at the house and summer classes were planned, and a support group of people in Amherst pledged to check on the Soms multiple times a week.

After the Soms had established themselves in Amherst, the Cambodian Crisis Committee

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41 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 1, “South Congregational Church,” Preparations folder, November 23, 1982, page a.
42 Cambodian Crisis Committee MS 361 Box 1, “South Congregational Church,” Preparations folder, November 23, 1982, page c.
43 Interview with Elaine Kenseth-Abel, November 30, 2010.
formed, and a few other families arrived in Amherst and the surrounding towns. When asked about the adjustment of each family, Abel mentioned that the Soms adjusted to life in the U.S. the best. The resources which had been available to them were in shorter supply when the other families started coming. At least seven families came to the area, and they had relatives join them, creating units of more than twenty per family. Yet the Soms, who were comfortable in the U.S. by that time did not offer much assistance to these Cambodians. Abel thinks that they felt they had a special status, as the first Cambodians in town, and they were not concerned with the difficulties of the other refugee families.

From Abel’s description of the Som family, it is clear that they had a somewhat unique experience compared to most Cambodians’ arrival in the U.S. Yet they were still faced with many hardships that all the immigrants shared. They had to learn a difficult new language, English, which contained vowel sounds they had never learned how to make. They had to learn how to use the bus system to travel, since none of them had a driver’s license yet. The children took to the new culture and language faster than the parents did; the father, Ly Som, had to take English classes for a number of years at the New England Institute for Language in Northampton, which was not cheap. Because of this, Ly had to work a low-level job at Atkins Farm, because while he was trained in Cambodia as a carpenter, he could not communicate with the other English-speaking workers, so he would not be able to understand directions and complete tasks. This caused a lot of frustration, because as an adult man, Ly was not able to do the skilled work he knew he was capable of. These frustrations were common among all adult Cambodians who had been teachers, doctors, government employees, etc in Cambodia, but were not able to take on these jobs without first mastering English.
Basic, everyday tasks also proved frustrating, especially buying and cooking food. The mother, Ream Thou, had never been in a supermarket before, and needed a lot of assistance locating cheap, familiar foods. For example she recognized bananas right away, but since apples were much cheaper, her family had to get used to eating this new, unfamiliar fruit instead. Ream Thou eventually discovered a Korean market in Springfield, and purchased much of the family’s food there, but could only go to Springfield once she was comfortable taking public transportation on her own. She was also not used to the type of stove installed in the house, and had to locate a certain type of firewood to use for cooking. Interestingly, today Ream travels frequently to Cambodia as a sort of merchant, and trades American goods for Cambodian ones, then brings them back to the U.S. to sell. Most other families either did not have the means to go back to Cambodia for a few decades after immigrating, or did not wish to return at all after their traumatizing experiences.⁴⁴

The arrival of the Som family in Amherst triggered the creation of the Cambodian Crisis Committee. The people who had been central in organizing the lives of the Soms in the U.S. felt that they would be able to orchestrate this immigration and resettlement project for more Cambodian families immigrating to Massachusetts, as well as instruct other refugee agencies around the country on the best, most effective ways of advocating and resettling. Elaine Kenseth-Abel, a self-described “little church lady,” had a knack for inspiring support and organizing large efforts. She has experience teaching special needs children, and had previously traveled abroad. At age 40, with a one-year-old daughter and three older children, Abel dedicated herself to the CCC’s efforts, which had started from her father, the pastor of South Congregational Church. A

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⁴⁴ Interview with Elaine Kenseth-Abel, November 30, 2010.
resourceful woman, at one critical period she was able to raise $5,000 in seven weeks for a trip to Thailand.

Because she was not working professionally at the time, Abel dedicated herself to the committee, and after helping the Soms settle into their new life, she set out to advocate for the Cambodians still in the Thai camps. The political atmosphere in the U.S. during the early to mid-eighties was one where those in power tried to ignore the problems occurring in Southeast Asia. There was little in the news during the late seventies to inform the American people about the atrocities occurring in Cambodia. Abel admitted that all she knew about Cambodia prior to her involvement in the resettlement program was that “Nixon had bombed Cambodia in ’70, and the Vietnamese did a ‘bad thing’ by invading Cambodia in ’79.” The U.S. State Department condemned the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, even though it was the only event to stop the Cambodian genocide by the Khmer Rouge. The term “genocide” was not even used by the U.S. government to refer to the horrible liquidation of more than a third of Cambodia’s population. The American people were kept in the dark about these issues, therefore there was not much information circulating about how badly the Cambodian refugees needed help.

Kitty Dukakis, a notable figure at the time, took notice in what the CCC was doing for the Cambodia refugees, and she made advocating for these people one of her main priorities. Dukakis convinced Senators and Congressmen to make trips to Thailand to see the camps for themselves. She also helped the CCC write letters to inform town and state representatives of the growing Cambodia constituency, and all the people who liked and supported these immigrants. If the representatives wanted to be reelected, they would have to work for increased Cambodian immigration. In the interview, Elaine also mentioned how gaining the strong support of Senator

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Kennedy and Senator Hatfield had been crucial, because they worked very hard on the Refugee Act of 1980, which reformed the U.S. immigration law and admitted refugees for humanitarian reasons. This was an important step, as was gaining national recognition for what the CCC was achieving. Abel stated that she would receive calls in her kitchen from immigrants all over the U.S. asking if the CCC could help them bring over a relative from Thailand. “We were there as a resource for everybody else; we had the best information. We had ‘Deep Throat’ information…we can’t say where the information came from, but it was cogent and true,” stated Abel about the status of the CCC and its sources of information. In Advocacy Updates the CCC would disseminate condensed summaries of their information, as a way to educate Americans who were not exposed to news from Southeast Asia regarding Cambodians.

1984 to ’85 was the toughest time for the CCC. The Thai government was no longer allowing refugees to enter the camps, and it was a huge struggle to get ration cards for the undocumented refugees that snuck into the camps. On one of Abel’s visits to Khao-I-Dang camp, she was shown secret hideouts where these undocumented Cambodians were hidden. Families would dig what were essentially graves under the bed or table in their hut, and bury the undocumented refugee alive inside. Food was snuck to them when available, and reeds were stuck through the ground and used as breathing tubes. The CCC’s main goal at this period was to get ration cards for as many people as possible. Only when people were documented and allowed to be given food rations did they stand a chance of leaving Thailand for a safe country. In 1986 the Thai government announced that it was closing all the refugee camps. This was a good thing for the CCC: it proved that there were no longer any undocumented refugees, and that the process of interviewing and evaluating Cambodians for immigration had greatly sped up.

46 Interview with Elaine Kenseth-Abel, November 30, 2010.
After the camps were closed in 1986, the CCC no longer had a reason to function after everyone had been processed in ‘87. Abel said that they are “technically still on the books, but there is nothing to be active for anymore, because we achieved our goal. If we have to be active again, we will be active.”