
“I’m Not A Refugee Anymore”

An Interview with Maria De Rosa

Valerie Yates interviews Maria De Rosa, an independent producer based in Ottawa, on her recent documentary on a Cambodian refugee family.

The Srengs arrived in Canada in April 1987, after surviving seven years in a refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border. One year later, the shooting of a documentary, co-produced by Maria De Rosa, marked their first year in their new home — a bittersweet anniversary for the family. Spring 1989 sees the family in their second year in Ottawa.

The Sreng family — consisting of Vannan; her husband, Vaesna; and their two children, Vanta, 21, and Van Morning, 13, escaped Cambodia in 1980. They fled a country ravaged by the Cambodian Khmer Rouge, which killed approximately two million Cambodians in their four-year reign, and by the 120,000 Vietnamese troops that overran Cambodia in 1979. Before the Khmer Rouge “purge,” Cambodia had been wracked first by American bombing during the Vietnamese war, and then by civil war.

Vannan, the central character of the half-hour documentary, was but one of more than 294,000 displaced Cambodians camped at the edge of Thailand. In 1983, after three years in the Khai-i-Dang camp, Vannan met Randi Cherry, a Canadian travelling through Southeast Asia. A bond was immediately formed between the two women; for four years the two women faithfully wrote to each other (one in a laborious and desperate mixture of French and English). For four years Cherry struggled to get Vannan and her family out of the refugee camp. Vannan Sreng is now one of 1,281 Cambodian refugees in Canada.

“I’m Not a Refugee Anymore” is your first documentary. Why did you choose this story?

I wanted to do a documentary on refugees, and the Sreng family came to my attention quite by chance, through some friends. We were talking about refugees and conversation turned to an incredible Cambodian family, here in Ottawa. I heard they were trying to integrate into Canadian society, they were trying to learn English and to find work.

When I first met Vannan, I found her very reserved. Despite her reluctance, I felt instinctively that there was much more to this care-worn yet beautiful woman. I felt she had a story to tell.

I was really struck by one of her stories, about Vanta’s first trip on a bus, with Randi. Vanta couldn’t believe she was free to go on a bus; when she got off the bus she said, quite slowly, “I’m not a refugee anymore.” That stayed in my mind. These people got excited about taking a ride on a bus — something we hardly equate with freedom. I thought this is it, this is the story. That’s what the documentary should focus on. I was also struck by Randi’s — the sponsor’s — remarkable altruism and generosity.

Though the focus of the documentary is the horror experienced by the family and their experiences once in Canada, a sub-theme seems to be the relationship between Vannan and Randi.

BY VALERIE YATES

Yes. I found the bond between these two women — of such disparate cultures, different languages — fascinating. I'd think of all those letters — 120 of them. One every two weeks for four years. Pleas from Vannan, painfully written with the help of a dictionary, asking that her family and herself be brought to Canada. I'd also think of the help and friendship that Randi continued to offer Vannan once in Canada.

It's only natural, then, that Randi is the narrator and Vannan the central character.

Absolutely. It's no coincidence. The story begins with the two women. The first contact between them alters the fate of the Sreng family. They manage to leave the camp, thanks to Vannan's strength of character, Randi's kindness, and thanks to luck. They were lucky.

Vannan is a survivor. She's strong, incredibly strong. She took her family out of Phnom Penh, the capital, by herself in 1980. She later walked to the Thai border. Once in the camp she insisted that her children, who were separated from her, be schooled and taught English. She's an intuitive, perceptive woman: she recognized in Randi their last and only hope.

Vannan and Vanta are the ones who talk, who cope and deal with the situation. Vaesna is much less communicative and less willing to discuss the situation. That's why he only appears briefly, at the end of the documentary. Van Morning was too young; however, images of what he re-

members of the children's camp surface in his paintings. Vannan is truly the backbone of the family: even in Canada she looks after their continued survival.

Vannan has an incredible blend of hope, survival instinct and compassion. There is even idealism, despite all she went through.

Do you know if she ever gave up?

No; no, she didn't. She never gave up, despite years — since 1975 — of misery and unpredictability. Despite the hardships associated with starting all over again in Canada. I know she had moments of depression. One of the most painful reminders of her ordeal came while working in a daycare centre in Ottawa: she would remember seeing the faces of children dying of starvation in the camps.

One half-hour seems short for such a topic. Are there themes, events or issues you would have wished to explore in greater detail?

Oh yes. I would have liked to spend much more time on the family's experiences and problems in Canada. After all, their problems are far from over: in a sense, they're just beginning. They must still look after their survival, and that means working in a different culture and language, learning new skills. There is no rest for them. They must adapt to their new country — to a new climate, new food, to a population whose perception of refugees is not necessarily favourable.

The word "refugee" seems to be a dirty word. It conveys images of people in funny clothes, of people stealing jobs. Especially today, with all the talk of creating new refugee legislation.

There were so many conflicts unfolding behind the scenes of the documentary — problems one half hour just couldn't encompass. For example, a conflict was beginning to emerge between mother and daughter. Vanta is 21: she's attractive, she wants to go out. In addition, problems arose out of Canadian society's different approach to love and marriage. In Cambodia, tradition dictates that marriages are arranged by parents. Randi tries, in these conflicts, to delicately provide new perspectives.

Did the making of this documentary reveal new research possibilities to you?

Yes, several. I would like to see work done on the needs of refugee families, the particular problems they face in Canada. I think refugee families in general and refugee women in particular need assistance. The mother-daughter problem illustrates this. I can see a documentary specifically on the needs of refugee women.

The Canadian community does not offer the kind of support that Randi offers. She played a crucial role as a sponsor; it was a difficult, time-consuming role.

"I'm Not A Refugee Anymore," which aired December 11, 1988 on CJOH TV and December 18, 1988 on the CTV Network, will run again in the Spring of 1989.

Annual Directory of Women's Media, 1989

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