

1975–1979: Terror and genocide

On April 17, 1975, less than two weeks before the fall of Saigon, the Khmer Rouge seized Phnom Penh and immediately began to drive the city's 2 million residents into the countryside. This was the first stage in its brutal attempt to transform Cambodia into a primitive communal utopia. In reality, the Khmer Rouge turned the country into an enormous forced labor camp. Money, property, books and religion were outlawed. Cambodia's economy, already severely damaged by years of bombing and civil war, ground to a halt. All decisions in the newly renamed Democratic Kampuchea came from a shadowy and unquestionable leadership known simply as angkar, or "the organization."

Forced Labor under the Khmer Rouge – April 1976

In less than four years, between 1.7 million and 2.5 million people died, out of a population of 8 million. Many succumbed to starvation or exhaustion. Tens of thousands were tortured and executed in places like Phnom Penh's infamous Tuol Sleng prison.

The Khmer Rouge completely closed Cambodia to the outside world. But reports of atrocities trickled out of the country, sparking a debate in the United States and the West. News of mass killings and starvation seemed to vindicate those who had predicted a bloodbath once the Khmer Rouge came to power. Khmer soldiers in Phnom Penh However, some antiwar activists questioned the accuracy of these reports, claiming that they were exaggerations meant to discredit the new Communist regime.

In the face of mounting evidence of Khmer Rouge atrocities, the U.S. government stayed quiet. After the debacle of the Vietnam War, few American politicians were willing to get reinvolved in Southeast Asia, and the government was not eager to examine its complex role in Cambodia's collapse. Not until April 1978 did President Jimmy Carter declare the Khmer Rouge "the worst violator of human rights in the world."

By then, the Khmer Rouge had less than a year left in power. Ironically, its downfall was brought on by a conflict with its former ally, Vietnam. A border dispute between Democratic Kampuchea and communist Vietnam flared into full-scale war, and in January 1979, Vietnamese forces rolled into Phnom Penh.

<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/cambodia/tl03.html>



Witnessing the Horror:

Eyewitness accounts of the Khmer Rouge reign of terror

Although I am not the only person who had gone through the years of horror under the Khmer Rouge's reign my life has been inflicted with the wound and the scar that can never be removed.

By Moly Ly

It was the morning of April 17, 1975. The gleaming sun rose gradually, emerging from the horizon in a captivating view. In contrast, our lives little by little began to move into darkness. Although I was young at the time, I learned a lot from my brother Eng Ly, a journalist. He inspired me. He taught me how disastrous it was going to be under this new regime. Knowing the Communist theory and its indiscriminate manslaughter, I was wondering at the young age of thirteen if we would be fortunate enough to see the sunlight again. Things I used to do in life, a modest but happy and rustic life, seemingly would vanish in this obscure and unknown world of darkness.

That day we found ourselves hiding inside the house pretending to be unaware of any outside events. But soon we were awakened by a throng of Khmer Rouge soldiers banging on our front door. "Go or we will shoot!" screamed one of them. We could no longer pretend. Grasping all our belongings, my mother, my sisters Naykea, Navy, and Kuyny, two nieces, and two nephews left Phnom

Penh with thousands of other families. We walked with our bundles on our shoulders and heads.

Understanding what the Communists would do to him, my brother Eng departed a different way from our family in an attempt to escape northward to Thailand. He was close to six feet tall, the opposite of me, and a well-known journalist, so he was very hard to conceal. For him the victory of the Khmer Rouge was fraught with danger. We could only pray for him and wish him the best of luck.

A group of Khmer Rouge soldiers threatened the crowds, "Go! Go! Hurry! Hurry!" They were dressed in black with red kramas wrapped around their heads and fifles slung on their shoulders. I started to hear small children cry, and I cried too. We were heading to Takeo, the province in which my mother and father were born and raised. On the way there corpses were lying everywhere. At every stop we made we needed to find water to cook with or to drink.

At the first stop I carried my water bucket to the nearby river. About forty-five feet away from me was a dead body floating and swelling up like a dead buffalo in the water. I had no choice but to boil the water, drink it, and cook with it. I cried at night with hopelessness and despair. I knew that this was just the beginning of the long journey. I asked myself why any human being had to suffer like this.

We arrived at Takeo at last, but after a few months we were dispatched to a small village in Battambang Province. My oldest sister, Naykea, and her family were sent in a different direction since she and her husband were former teachers. In our village there were about 300 families. Each family owned a hut that was about twelve feet long by twelve feet wide. People were divided up into five classes: small children, bigger children, single women and men, married women and men, and elderly women and men.

Each class was forced to work in a different field. Every one had to endure hard work from dawn to dusk. They got a few hours of rest if they worked close to the village. If you worked far from the village you only got half an hour to one hour of rest and mealtime. Being fourteen at the time, I was first put into the single men class but then was sent back to the bigger children group because I was a little too small. On and off, my sister Kuyny and I were sent to work

far from the village. We were called kong chalat, meaning mobile troupes.

Our duties included building dikes, digging canals, liquidating the forest by removing roots, chopping logs and branches, and setting old brush on fire. We mixed up human remains with soil. The heavy buckets carrying the soil were attached to a flat stick that dug into our shoulders. Every day we were starving yet forced to work harder. Small children who could walk and work (as young as five or six years old) were given jobs. Our sustenance was a small amount of watery rice.

Our lives were gradually being claimed by these ferocious animals, the illiterate and brainwashed Khmer Rouge whose leaders were obedient to China. Some people were accused of being lazy and were taken out and brutally executed simply because they became mentally sick or were physically unable to work. Teachers, lawyers, doctors, former soldiers—especially high-ranking officers—and other intellectuals were the most vulnerable and were targeted for execution. Some were lucky and hid their real identities. But many were often wrongly accused because of the way they looked. Wearing eyeglasses (remains from the old regime) could mean death because the Khmer Rouge thought that glasses meant the person was educated. The Khmer Rouge said that a firing squad was a waste of bullets. Instead of bullets, the Khmer Rouge killed by beating people with the back of a hoe. They called this *vay choul*.

Being hungry for one day is hard enough. But, day after day, month after month, and year after year, hunger debilitated us to the point of insanity. We cooked and ate nonpoisonous grass like it was a vegetable, just to gratify our hungry stomachs. The swarming insects that were edible became nourishment. What had once been repulsive foods became desirable. Some people were so hungry that they dug up dead bodies and slit the flesh and fried it. One man was caught doing this and was put to death.

My little niece Viphea was about two years old. The only words she knew how to speak were, buy, Pa, and Mak, which meant in English, "steamed rice," "Dad", and "Mom." She kept repeating these three words. Her father, with his swollen feet hands, and face, could not stand to hear his wailing, hollering little daughter, He

started to slap her around. There was no question in my mind that my brother-in-law Ngeth was abnormally susceptible to the agony of starvation. A former high school math teacher before the fall of the country and considered by many to be a gentleman, he now couldn't differentiate between right and wrong. My sister Navy stopped the beating and separated the two. She also looked very pale with the same disease as her husband, a swollen face, feet and hands. This disease was the most prevalent. Malaria and dysentery were also epidemics and claimed many lives.

I wasn't even sure I could rally my energy to stay alive. I had excruciating pain. I no longer cried but accepted this horrifying experience as if it were normal. Nightfall meant heaven to us. When I went to sleep on my bed made from twigs, I wished that I could close my eyes and never wake up to see the sun again.

After a few months my little niece became swollen, like an overinflated water balloon. She was so weak. She seldom pleaded for steamed rice. She either lost her memory or was too ill to talk. When she did speak, it was no longer to say Pa or Mak, but only buy. I had never seen her smile. Her gloomy appearance begged for compassion. She never had a chance to understand the meaning of joy. Nothing on earth could have tormented me more than to witness a little girl come out of her mother's womb only to be tortured slowly, day in and day out.

One early morning my sister Navy ran feebly but hastily outside and around the hut. With her little daughter in her arms, she screamed for help. Her unusual strength indicated that something unusual was happening. Viphea's eyes looked so spiritless. Her pupils rolled reluctantly up and down. She was unable to speak. My sister's tears were flowing from her pale, swollen eyes. Over and over again Navy begged, screamed, and cried as she scurried around the hut. Our neighbors could only leap from their shacks and stare at Viphea with wide eyes filled with sorrow. About an hour later Viphea died. Although we were filled with intense grief, there were no regrets for her death, because the price of staying alive was too high. I knew she was at peace and I prayed for her.



This picture was taken on October 20, 1974. Viphea was 8 months and 24 days young. The picture was sent to her 2 years-old cousin, Sody, who was in the US at the time.

Some time later my brother-in-law Ngeth was escorted out of the village. We were told that they sent him to the hospital because he was too sick to work. I became suspicious, and then I realized that he would be gone forever. We were powerless to help him. Three people that day, including Ngeth, were taken away by the Khmer Rouge. They were all former high school teachers and we assumed they were murdered. They never came back.

About fifty families were transferred to another district. The Khmer Rouge put these unfortunate families in a big American military truck and took them away. A few days later it was revealed by the local soldiers that these families had Vietnamese blood and for that reason were put to death. I lost quite a few friends, most of them were Chinese Cambodians. The complexion of their skin was only a little lighter than mine.

After learning that Navy was a midwife, the Khmer Rouge used her to train their comrades who couldn't read. After teaching them what she knew she was expelled from the training. A few months later she grew very sick and was put into the hospital near the village. The hospital had no doctors and no nurses, only a group of illiterate comrades who were trained for a few months like the ones my sister had trained. She was better off staying in this hospital than staying at home and subjecting herself to harassment for being unable to work.

Since Navy was at one time helpful to the Khmer Rouge and because she was so sick, I was allowed to stay with her. Navy's whole body was swollen terribly. She later died in my arms. It was devastating to me since I was vigilant over her for a couple of days, knowing that she didn't have long to live. Speaking incoherently in a grief-stricken voice, I cried bitterly and emotionally. Navy's dead body was buried with two other dead bodies. My request to place her underground in her own grave was rejected.

After Navy's death I went back home to be with my mother, who had the same disease as Navy. I was almost beaten to death with a long stick just because I disobeyed the order not to collect any remaining potatoes after Angka finished gathering them. I was trying to help feed my mother. My black shirt was saturated with blood from my back. My mother wept. The next day I could hardly move and was incapable of going to work. Because I tried to help my mother I was deprived of rice water. It was a nightmare to see my ill mother carrying buckets of water from a stagnant pond to take care of me. I should have been taking care of her! She was in her mid-fifties but looked like she was in her mid-seventies. Her weak and swollen body had to endure so much to save herself and her son.

Months later I was sent to work far from my mother in one of the kong chalat. My sister Kuyny was almost always in a mobile troop because she was in the single-women class. Although I begged not to go because my mother was too sick to stay alone, I was refused. My mother was then sent to the same hospital where my sister died. About a month later, while I was working, the bad news came to me. A village leader who happened to be there said that my mother had just passed away. I asked to go see my mother's body, but the Khmer Rouge didn't let me. "She's dead. What good is it to see her?" Even before my mother's death, when I asked to visit her, they said, "You're not a doctor. What good is it to see her?" I was no longer scared of dying, and I ran away from the work camp to the hospital, knowing that I would face serious consequences if I got caught. At the hospital I learned that my mother was already buried with one other dead person.

Before long I heard the news from my aunt that my oldest sister Naykea, her husband, Try, and one surviving child had come to look for us. They found only the empty hut. Her family had been allowed to leave their town because of a disastrous flood. She found a village to live in about five miles from our village. I never thought I would see her again because she and her husband were former school teachers.

I sneaked away again from my village, this time to search for my oldest sister. I was a worn-out, skeletal figure craving food. I knew beyond a doubt that I was running out of time. But my

determination to live remained inside me. On the way I decided to go over to the rice field and gather rice in its husk and consume it as fast as I possibly could to fill up my stomach. I got caught by the kong chloup, who were Khmer Rouge spies. This time I knew I was in big trouble. It was getting dark, and I was dragged into a jail.

Once there, I was stunned to see only four women and a man. Without observing the clothes they wore, it was difficult to tell the difference between the man and the women. They had extremely fragile figures. Bones were popping out from everywhere in their bodies. At night our feet were cuffed with a special kind of wood to prevent us from escaping. At dawn we were dragged to work near the jail, plucking the soil.

The next day, one of the women died in her sleep. Her ankles had been cuffed. I now realized that this was a death camp to cruelly torture people by starving and overworking them. Sometimes they threw food scraps at our faces and laughed. Other times we were beaten for being so exhausted from the hard work. I could no longer function like a human being. I knew in my heart that my spirit was going to die.

The door to the jail was opened as usual the next morning. It was time to go to work. A dark-complexioned man with a friendly smile said to me, "Come with me. Your sister is waiting for you." I breathed a sigh of relief. Naykea had heard from a friend that I was a prisoner, so she implored this generous man, who was a village leader, to help me. He was a remarkable, warmhearted man, even though he was trusted by the Khmer Rouge. In this new village our lives were better. But we were still very skinny and sick looking.

A few months later the Vietnamese came and chased the Khmer Rouge away, but tragically, Naykea had the disease of swollen face, hands, and feet. My sister was excited about the invasion, knowing that no other regime could be worse than the Khmer Rouge, but she was fighting for her life. Everyone left the village but us because Naykea couldn't walk. Finally, Naykea died. Her death was so regrettable and frustrating.

The sinister menace of Communism not only destroyed my family but also caused the death of millions of Cambodians. The effects of the Khmer Rouge's hatred and massacre of its own people will never

fade away. Pol Pot is dead, but had never faced justice. Many of his entourage are still alive and living comfortably. Why do we as human beings condone such a notorious, reprehensible phenomenon by allowing these ferocious murderers to still be loose?

I dedicate this story to my beloved mother, grandmother, brother, sisters, brother-in-law, niece, and nephews, who left this world in agony during the years of horror.

<http://www.khmerfamily.com/molystory.htm>

The Dark Years of My Life

Savuth Pen, is now living in Minnesota. Savuth is currently working as an electrical engineer for a utility company.

By Savuth Pen

In April 1975, immediately after the New Year celebration, my young life began to turn upside down. I was just twelve years old. I remember overhearing my parents' conversation that our country was at peace at last. Both of my parents served in the military. My father was a captain. His name was Kuhn. I believe my mother was a staff sergeant. Her name is Sareth. They met during the police academy training for the Royal Police and were converted to Khmer Republic Army personnel after the coup d'état by General Lon Nol in 1970.

What my parents did not know was that their lives would be turned upside down in a very short time. The Khmer Rouge marched into the city of Battambang in dirty black pajama uniforms, shoes made of used tires, and with AK-47 rifles strapped around their shoulders. They were not very friendly. We didn't know how to react except to hang a white flag in front of our home, as suggested by my father, as a means of surrender and a sign of peaceful intentions.

Immediately the Khmer Rouge ordered all male military officers to and personnel to report to the school south of the city. My mother and I buried all the military belongings we could find in

our home after we heard they would make searches during the first of the takeover. There were many Khmer Rough soldiers surrounding the school area. One day when I brought lunch for my father on my bicycle, the school was emptied. I saw people walking around looking for their husbands and fathers. When I asked them where my father was, they said the Khmer Rough sent him to welcome our king back into the country.

One day later, the Khmer Rough evacuated the city. My mother decided to go back to her hometown, which was about ten miles from the city. Unfortunately, my mother received news that affected our family forever. I have six younger sisters and one younger brother. My mother called me and one of my sisters to a quiet room and told us that my father was wounded and was being hidden in a remote location in his hometown. I started to cry and my mother said not tell anybody, even my younger brother and sisters. My mother decided to be with father and take care of him. She took me and my other two sisters along. The rest of the family stayed with my grandparents.

When I met my father again, about two days later, he looked so frightened and pale. He was a man who was too disciplined to show emotion or weakness but that was what I saw now. I started to cry again, and my father said not to cry but to be strong. I learned that the Khmer Rough didn't ship my father to welcome the king. Instead, they shipped my father and the rest of the military officers to a remote area northwest of the city, near the Thai border. They asked all the officers to stand in formation and then they mass executed them, without any blindfolds, with machine guns, rifles, and grenades. Then they shot one by one at anybody who moved.

My father was buried underneath all the dead bodies. Fortunately, only one bullet went through his arm and two bullets stuck in his skull. The bullets that stuck in his skull lost momentum after passing through the other bodies. My father stayed motionless underneath the dead bodies until dark, then he tried to walk to his hometown during the night.

The whole family was shocked by this unexpected event. We thought the country was at peace at last, but instead, it was just

the beginning of the dark years, years I wished that no one in the civilized world would have had to experience.

During the evacuation period, Khmer society seemed to be in disarray. People tried to find their way out of the city. I tried to load the family belongings onto my bike. I could make only two trips a day between my father hometown and my home in the city, which were about eight miles apart, because of the tremendously heavy traffic.

One month later people settled down in their chosen town, and everywhere things seemed to be very quiet, except for my family. The Khmer Rough threatened that if anyone was hiding the enemy, the whole family would be executed. My father's relatives were very nervous. They tried to find a solution for my family. They discussed either poisoning my father, hiding him underground, or giving us an ox cart to try to get to Thailand since my father could speak Thai fluently. The first solution was too inhumane. The second solution was impossible since the rainy season was approaching and the underground cave would fill with water. The probability of getting caught if they used the third solution was high, because traveling was prohibited without a pass.

One event still haunts me even after years of trying to block it out in my subconscious. The final solution was reached by my father's brother-in-law. He informed the Khmer Rough soldiers where my father was, and that night, twelve soldiers, along with my brainwashed uncle, surrounded our cabin. They asked my mother where my father was and she told them he wasn't there. A couple soldiers climbed up with their flashlights and found him hiding in the corner of our cabin. Immediately they tied my father up and walked him about a thousand feet from our cabin. My mother followed behind them, but they pushed her back and said she should go back and take care of the crying children.

My mother ran to my father's oldest brother, who lived nearby and also had served in the military. When he heard about the incident he ran to hide himself in the bushes close to where the Khmer Rough soldiers were with my father. The soldiers then placed my father in the middle of the rice field, pointed flashlights at him, and shot him. My father was still standing after they fired several

rounds at him. They walked toward my father and kicked him to the ground and proceeded to bayonet him.

This time, the unforgiving Khmer Rouge did not let my father survive. During the shooting I heard at least two rounds of fire which lasted only a few moments, but it seemed like forever. We stayed with our relatives for rest of the night and waited in fright to verify if he was still alive. Unfortunately, we found his motionless body lying in the middle of the rice field. My father's bullet-ridden and bloodless body lay face up in the 90-degree heat for whole day.

That afternoon we saw a jeep filled with killer Khmer Rouge soldiers passing by my father's motionless and defenseless body. Apparently they had come to verify if my father was still dead. In late afternoon, under the hot and sunny sky, big black clouds suddenly started to form over the town while my father's nephews tried to bury him at the spot where he died. Suddenly, heavy rain and hail began to pour down from the sky. We felt so cold, so afraid, and so fragile without the warm and secure protection of our beloved father.

Three months later my grandpa reunited us with the rest of the family at my mother's hometown. We passed through the city, which looked like a ghost city except for a few demon Khmer Rouge soldiers riding their bicycles, laughing and smiling at one another. I tried to keep my anger and hatred from showing up. We were even afraid to look at them. We were afraid they might detect what we knew about their unjustifiable actions against their own innocent Khmer people.

For the next three years my family went through many events that I will never be able to forget. According to the uncivilized and insane Khmer Rouge government, Khmer society was classified as consisting of two types: the old and the new people. The people who they liberated before April 1975 they called the old people, and they provided them with better treatment and living conditions. The people who they liberated after April 1975 they called the new people, whom they treated as their slaves to do all the labor-intensive work without adequate food, supplies, and housing. My family was in the latter group. My mother was forced to remarry, and if she refused, they threatened to terminate her life.

Because of my mother's background with the Khmer Republic Army, which they considered to be their number one enemy, she had no choice but to accept the arrangement. My new stepfather and my mother had a son about a year later.

In the meantime, I was sent to a remote farming area with a group of other young boys to build an irrigation system for increasing the rice production. One of my sisters was sent to another area with a group of young girls. Two of my sisters died from starvation and disease. My mother had to escape to another, safer area, called Zone 3, with my new half-brother, since the Khmer Rough was looking for her.

My dispersed family members lived under constant fear and hunger. We were too hungry to show any sign of hatred or revenge. Every night seemed to last forever. It was hard to fall asleep with an empty stomach. Sometimes I filled my stomach with water in order to feel full so I could sleep easier. As it turned out, I had to get up more frequently to relieve myself. I remember that the other boys and I extended a long tube from our floor to the nearest outside bush to relieve ourselves during the night. Unfortunately, our Khmer Rough master destroyed our energy-saving device the next morning.

During the day I would hunt for food like snakes and rats, or anything that moved. This was allowed only during a short break after the long labor-intensive work. My body was so thin and weak from lack of adequate nutrition. The other young boys were in the same condition as mine. We looked like grandpas to one another. We rarely played or had long conversations because we lacked energy and tried to conserve it for the next day's work quota.

During the last year under the Khmer Rough's rule, my sisters, brother, and I joined my mother in Zone 3. While at Zone 3, I was sent to clear new land for growing cotton. There was plenty of food to eat and a lot of tropical fruits to pick. It was the first that I felt life was worth living, but I was so sad that I never had a chance to see my family at all. It seemed that the whole country was divided into many zones. Each zone had its own leadership but was under one insane and merciless Khmer Rough government. Some zones, such as Zone 3, had better treatment and more mercy than other zones.

In late 1978 and early 1979 the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia, driving the Khmer Rouge government into the jungle in western Cambodia. Without any more Khmer Rouge masters around, my family, immediate relatives, and other people returned to the city to their original homes. Except for cement columns, my home was no longer standing. Our family and some of my immediate relatives stayed in other people's homes. When we did a head count of our family, two were missing and four were dead.

For those four years of living under the inhumane treatment of an insane Khmer Rouge government, every day seemed like months, months seemed like years, and years seemed like centuries. Time seemed to be at a standstill. There was no schooling and no prospect for the future. The only things I learned were hatred and revenge for my father and sisters' deaths. Even after seventeen years, I'm not so sure I can say the word forgive, but I surely will never forget what the Khmer Rouge did to my family and their own Khmer people. I hope such an insane government will never rule Cambodia or any civilized country again.

Some historians argue that US intervention was primarily responsible for the Khmer Rouge coming to power and the subsequent suffering of civilians in Cambodia. How valid is this argument? Use evidence to support your position.

Upload your response to

<http://modernhistory.edublogs.org/>