**Oral Histories and Biographies Cambodian Genocide**

**The articles on these pages are based on first-hand accounts by survivors of the Khmer Rouge reign. Some are verbatim transcripts of interviews; others have been paraphrased or rewritten, but all accurately reflect the stories told by the principals. Please read and summarize the survivor accounts and be prepared to present in class.**

**Group 1**

**THREE WOMEN: ORAL HISTORIES: SAMBO THOUCH-Collected and translated by Elizabeth Chey, in 1995**

**Sambo Thouch**

**Born June 6, 1938 in Phnom Penh**

I taught grammar for 17 years. I was the Vice Principal, second in charge, at the grammar school for two years -- until the war began. I was the oldest of 11 siblings and only 2 younger sisters survived during the Pol Pot regime. Well, my story is quite long.

They took my husband on May 28, 1975. He was a four-and-half star general, but he wasn't a war general. He never went to battle. During Sihanouk's reign, he served as a police chief in the Police Royale, as they called it. The Police Royale solely served and assisted the king. But when Lon Nol came to power, the police security force was dissolved and my husband and I traveled from province to province in his new position in the military. I was teaching in Kampong Speu when I was promoted to the position of vice principal. But life was interrupted by the Khmer Rouge. Since we feared the encroachment of the communist forces, my husband asked to be transferred back to Phnom Penh. We took our children and went back to live deep inside the city, in a Buddhist hospital right on Monivong Blvd.

We did not stay in the city for long. When the Khmer Rouge entered the city, they commanded everyone to evacuate their homes. We were directed by the Khmer Rouge to walk along National Road No. 1. As we were walking we'd stop along the side to spend the night. My whole family, my husband and six kids and my sisters and mother went along the road with our car. We moved along until we got to Kheann Svay. When we arrived in Kheann Svay, I saw a tall gateway leading into a temple. We walked toward it and some of my husband's underlings came to greet him. He stood silently. All this time he had tried to conceal his rank and identity by wearing layman clothes and rubber sandals, but he was still recognized. He nodded, but we tried to hide ourselves from those few workers.

At that place, there was a big gateway they had built. Yes, they built it to attract people. They extended the gateway by attaching leaves over it to make a roof. Under that roof there was a desk and some civilians sat at the desk recruiting people up to "help rebuild the country." They didn't have Khmer Rouge soldiers sit there, they forced other city people to sit there, so people would trust them. You see, my husband's workers had run to him near the desk. It was hard to conceal his status from them.

My husband wasn't the head honcho at his bureau. He held the second most important job. He held all the bureaucratic and accounting responsibilities under a major war general who was a figure-head office holder. But now we were dressed in rags. Seeing the desk, I thought things were normal and I told my husband to sign up. I didn't know what was to come. I just thought it would help us. They offered a cup of rice for each individual in our family, including the children. At the time, we thought only of food and where we could get it next. At this part of the road, there was nowhere to grow rice, not water to transplant the stalks. I had never farmed before either. I could never separate the rice from the stalks; that always bothered me. Anyhow, they said he would teach new soldiers for the government. They said he would be educating soldiers on military tactics. They lied. They had taken him for a week and they didn't give us a grain of rice. But the mission was supposed to be three months, as I was later told.

On the day my husband left, I packed his clothes. I asked him if he wanted a blanket and towels. He said, no. He told me not to pack anything. He knew what they were going to do to him, but he said nothing to me. I asked again, thinking it was strange that he should be gone for three months and not want a blanket to keep himself warm. He just took off his wedding band and said, "Save this. Save this so you can feed the children." He left with only the clothes on his body and rubber sandals.

Three months passed and all the wives were getting suspicious as to where their husbands had been sent. We asked them when our husbands would return, and because so many had inquired about their husbands' well-being, the Khmer Rouge leaders held a big meeting for all the wives; about 11 families were there. At the meeting, they said the teaching program was extended to six months. All the wives staying at the temple had been workers; women who held jobs as nurses, teachers and secretaries before the Khmer Rouge disrupted their daily lives. They said in their lingo, "Don't fret. We will all meet each other at that other plain." We'd all be reunited in hell was what they really they meant. When they ordered us to leave the temple, to go back to our hometowns, I realized my husband had been killed. Me and all the wives cried at the announcement. We used to see truckloads of men, dressed in black bring driven away, but we could barely make out the faces and could not recognize that their faces were the faces of our husbands. Until then, I hadn't realized I was being held prisoner. They had a 24-hour surveillance on us and when we left to do work in the fields, they kept tabs.

I don't understand my karma. At the same time we were relieved from the temple, my three youngest kids were suffering from terrible fevers. They were drenched in sweat. Good thing, I knew what to do or else they would have died then and there. I care very much about my children and am very caution about their health and hygiene. But I was thin and weak then. We headed toward Phnom Penh in the car, but discovered that the gasoline was stolen out of the tank. Not only that the car was stripped that night by Khmer Rouge hoodlums. Our nice clothes, that we had saved to trade for food were also taken. It was so rude when we were burglarized. They stole our belongings while we were asleep and they knocked on the window and woke us up to tell us that someone had just run away with the tires.

When we finally got to the town which was the station to go to Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge leaders told me that we would take a boat to Phnom Penh. Who'd ever heard of taking a boat to Phnom Penh when it was so near people could drive!? I knew we were going to be settled somewhere else on the other side of Tonle Sap. When we crossed the lake and docked on December 1975 and I gave birth to another child. After three months of traveling with little to eat, I gave birth to a baby, but it died of tetanus nine days after birth.

At the new village I lived in the older people liked me. I told them I sold lotto tickets at the marketplace in Phnom Penh, so they knew I could read Roman numbers, but they didn't know I could read and write in Khmer and French. They asked me how I was separated from my husband. I told them that he was out selling fabric and that the comrades (Khmer Rouge) forced me to leave without him. I lived well there, even though I was sick all the time. We weren't starving, but heavy labor made us all weak.

Later on, I was transferred to Kompong Thom district and in that village a few former employee of my husband settled there too. I recognized him and his family, but they pretended not to recognize me, which kept us both safe and mute. I sewed dresses while I was there. I stayed there until the Vietnamese invaded. Immediately after the invasion, the Khmer Rouge leaders all fled and people from within the village took on leadership roles under the Vietnamese. One day, the former employee sent a few kids to get me and I was quite nervous. When I went to the village center, I saw my name on a chalkboard with the number 85 and the word "votes" behind it. The employee spoke and said, "We have voted you into the position of president of the Women's Club." I didn't want them to think I was going to turn them down, nor did I want to keep the position, so I responded, "I came to this village to be 'educated' (the Khmer Rouge euphemism for the labor camps) and I have yet to learn before I can lead the people. Besides, I wasn't present when you took the vote. How can you vote me in if I am not here to represent myself? And I can't even read." My sentence about being present to represent myself gave me away and they knew it. But that was the very reason they had voted me in. I was made mayor of my village, head of the education reconstruction program and Women's club president under the Vietnamese. After that experience, I figured I did well in my last life, because I survived this time. They gave me a GMC car and adequate supplies such as books, fabric, sugar, and enough cabinets and boards for the classrooms.

Within a year, schools were reopened. The Vietnamese know how to treat the people they use. They gave us a lot to keep us happy. Even though I was working for the Vietnamese, I told myself that this was for the benefit of the Cambodian people. I was helping the people, not the government of Vietnam.

Since I was in a position of authority, I wanted to use it to my advantage. I wanted to save my children from an uncertain future. Their father's death was a lesson for me. If I didn't save my kids, there would be no one to carry on the family name. I saw the opportunity to save my children by going to Phnom Penh. I told the Vietnamese officials that I was going on vacation to visit my mother in the city and that I wanted my children to go as well. But I couldn't take the whole family at once, because they'd think I was fleeing. Luckily a cargo driver was going to Kompong Thom so I asked if he could take us all with him. I gave him money for his services and his silence. He would drive all the way to Phnom Penh. I wrote passes for all of us, just in case the Vietnamese soldiers on the roads would check us, but because there was so many kids they let us pass at each stop. When I got to Phnom Penh I wrote a letter of resignation and sent it back with the cargo driver.

There wasn't much time to waste in Phnom Penh, because I feared the Vietnamese would come after us since they knew we'd rush the border. I sent four of my kids off first, my two daughters and two of my four sons. We had a cousin in Connecticut, so I made sure they had an address with them and that would be their ticket to freedom. That night I cried for my daughters, thinking that if I didn't make it, they would be without a father and a mother. About a month after the separation, I received a telegram form the States and I knew now it was time for me, my two other sons and an orphan boy I adopted to go toward the Thai border. I still wrote out road slips for everyone as added security we'd make it through to the border. You see, they would close roads without warning, to block the refugee trafficking going to the Thai border, so we had to keep all the options open.

When I was on a road to Battambang, Thai soldiers robbed us. We had enough to bribe the soldiers to let us in the gate into Khao-I-Dang. It took a month for me to get there and I stayed there for two years. While I lived there, I volunteered as a teacher and helped at the hospital. When I was transferred to the Philippines, I volunteered all the time and in my two months in Chuon Bury, I was voted President of the Widowed Wives Association. But when I came to the United States I no longer did volunteer work. My ankles and knees give me a lot of pain. My face has changed a lot. Time and health haven't permitted me to help within the community. I also wanted to volunteer at the schools, but I work a lot. I've worked at C. Vitcomon Inc. as a QA inspector for seven years. They call me "Sam" there.

**Group 2**

**THREE WOMEN: ORAL HISTORIES: "MY"-Collected and translated by Elizabeth Chey, in 1995**

**"My"--Born 1940, in Battambang**

I was born in a province of Battambang in 1940 and I didn't leave there until 1979. I was the eighth child in a family of eleven. I never went to school because I had to care for the children in the family. Three of my brothers went to live in the temple.

I married when I was twenty-one to a farm boy who lived near my house. It was arranged and my mother gave us some money to start our own farm. The government was also distributing land, so my husband and I signed up for a big lot of land. We built our house of wood together and started a rice field.

I had my first child, Sopath in 1961 so I didn't harvest that year. In autumn, we went south to the lake to fish as everyone else did. In 1963, I had another daughter, Soka, who died of disease a year after she was born. Then I had Samkhann in 1964. In 1965, I had a miscarriage. There were no medicines or contraceptives where I was raised. Besides, the children helped in the fields. I had my sons, Sinath in 1968, Vichet in 1971. In between I had two miscarriages because I overworked myself while I was pregnant. I've always worked with my hands. When Samnang was born we were very lucky to be alive. He was born at 4 a.m. and I fainted for three hours. By 3 p.m. bombs were going off and bullets were shooting everywhere. The Khmer Rouge had entered our province, so we fled to Battambang and told the Khmer Rouge soldiers that we were going to the city to join the communist party.

We finally settled in north Tama. I was pregnant with Sophet in 1976, but there were no medicines and I had no milk, because we were all starving. I stole food, even though I've never stolen anything before. I stole fruits, food and extra spoonsful of porridge to save the baby. I ate extra porridge and forced myself to vomit it out so I could feed the baby. But after three months, the child died. In 1978, Sophoan was born. He was raised in the same manner, but he was strong enough to live. Although, I was often pregnant and caring for my children, I would go months without seeing my husband. Everytime we were in serious danger, he would disappear. He ran to care for his mother. He never stayed with me or his children. I always wondered how someone could dismiss his children like he did, his own flesh and blood.

The Khmer Rouge divided the kids up into age categories. The older ones were sent off to another camp. The pre-teen kids were weeders and rice planters. My sons had a green thumb, so the Khmer Rouge told them to plant rice. I raised my family as best I could without my husband. Two days after the Vietnamese had entered our country, my husband reappeared. We heard radio reports that there were camps at the Thai border, and that the UN had set up stations for refugees. Now with my husband back, we decided to head for the border. Of course, fighting between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese was still going strong in the north where I was. We ran for two weeks, because we were pushed back and forth by the Khmer Rouge, who were trying to stop refugees fleeing to the border. One time the shooting was so dense, our family was scattered about. I lost my nerves and was so weak I couldn't walk. It was just me and my sons, Sinath and Samkhann. Bullets were flying about everywhere and I felt death looming over my fate. I told my sons to run along and save themselves. But they cried and swore not to leave me to die on the road. The two boys, their bones so light and their bodies so thin, they just dragged me along the dirt road, carrying my weight on their shoulders. They dragged me for about 100 meters and we bumped into my brother-in-law and my mother and the family was reunited again. Along the way we met more family members in our group and made it to Khao-I-Dang the next morning.

While I was in Khao-I-Dang for two years, I had another miscarriage, then had Chantha, my youngest daughter in 1982. We spent another 16 months, transferring from Transit to the Philippines until we arrived in Chicago on November 5, 1988. My eldest son, Samkhann worked with many of the American groups who had been in the camps because he spoke English well. His boss in Transit found us a sponsor in 3-5 hours. Samkhann had wrote such touching letters that Americans couldn't believe the tragedy we went through and they were surprised he could write in English so well. Seven families in Evanston sponsored our family and we've lived in Chicago ever since. When I first got here, my blood nearly froze. It was really cold.

My husband was very reluctant to come because he didn't want to leave his mother. He was so distant from us when we arrived here. He asked to entered the monastery, then he became a monk in Ohio. I thought he would come back after finding Buddha. But instead, when he left in 1991, he went to California with his mother's family. I didn't hear from them until his mother died. My sister-in-law called to tell me my mother-in-law had died. I called my husband, asking him about help with funeral arrangements, but he pretended not to recognize my voice. How can someone not recognize the voice of their wife. Since then, I've lost all ties with him. I hear he has a new family out in California, but I don't care much. I think only of my children now.

My children need a father, especially the young ones, but he doesn't respond to his responsibilities as their father. I have no choice but to take the role of mother and father.

In the last five years, I used to cry every day, but tears have resolved nothing. I don't have anything. All I have is my children and I'm afraid for them every day. I was afraid for them when they went to high school. I was afraid they would take the wrong path and hang out with the wrong kids. I asked them about what they did at school and how their lives were going. I have to be close with my children to keep them safe.

I always say that I'm going to learn English, but it's so hard to learn. I was at a workshop one time and it was time for everyone to leave, but my son was late in coming to pick me up. The case worker was in a rush and he was very rude to me. He kept on asking me for my address and asked if I knew my phone number. All I knew was "no." So all I said was, "no." So he grabbed my folder and wrote some profanity on it and left. I didn't know it was bad, except for his facial expressions. My son later told me that it was something like, "Get the fuck out of this country if you don't know anything." I was really shook up. My son wanted to sue the case worker. We were not here illegally, he said. But I didn't want to cause trouble. It was just a good lesson for me. I was so humiliated from it that I had learned that I need to force myself to learn English.

Now I take English lessons from a tutor who comes to my house once a week. I can't remember , just a little here and a little there. I never went to school when I was young. I don't really remember the letters, I just remember things orally.

But education is the most important thing. Jewels and bracelets can be stolen, but not your education. I was born at the wrong time. I was born very poor. But I would do anything for my kids. I'll be their mother and their father, if they keep on studying like they do. I'm an old ox and I can't be forced to learn new things. I try to obey the commandments of Buddhism.

My children are very bright; they've made my life easier. A few years ago, I didn't want to live. I wanted to be hit by a car. But I've changed my mind recently for the sake of my younger children. They are good children, but they remain in ignorance about the world. I always encourage them to tell me about their sorrows and their concerns. I ask them to be truthful with me. I want them to fit in this society.

If kids are smart and independent, then the mother has few worries. If they are unsteady, then a mother has greater worries. A mother must think about her action and be virtuous. I must walk the right path, because I am a model for my children. I want to make space in the world for things that are fruitful. I'm embarrassed sometimes knowing that I cannot read or write. I don't want to take up space. I'd rather make room for the intelligent people.

My peace will be found in the temple as I learn the rites of religion. At my age, I've nothing to do, but pray for my children. I know that now I am their pillar, but later when they all grow up and leave, I will be alone with only myself to rely on. Then, I lean on prayers.

**Group 3**

**THREE WOMEN: ORAL HISTORIES: LENG HOUTH-Collected and translated by Elizabeth Chey, in 1995**

**Leng Houth--Born in 1951 in Svay Rieng**

I was the second from the oldest child, but the oldest daughter so I took care of my younger brothers and sisters. I went to primary school for six years and came home at noon to take care of the younger kids. Our family lived as traders. My mother opened shop, like a supermarket on our front door step and her and my father ran the business. My mother was illiterate and she wanted me to study and go to school and get a high education. She also had me learn Vietnamese, because our home was so near the Khmer-Vietnamese border, she felt it would benefit me. I went to high school and later went on to two years of college and I went for teacher qualification tests in Phnom Penh when I was 18.

While I was in school I met my husband, Houth Lach. We had gone to high school together and were interested in each other since them. But he left to serve in the Police Militaire for a year and left Svay Rieng to work in Phnom Penh. He visited my family daily that year and finally we were engaged in November of 1971. We married soon after and settled in Svay Rieng in a house of our own near my mother's home. By that time the war was escalating but everything was so uncertain, we weren't in a rush to do anything just yet.

I had my first child in November of 1972. Maranet, my daughter, stayed with her grandmother for a month as it is tradition to have the grandmother be a caretaker for the first child. Meanwhile, I never got into teaching, so I opened my own fabric company. Marital life was full of joys for me. My husband was very caring and an easy-going man. He helped with everything in the house and loved his daughter very much. He was gentle and careful with her always. Maranet was born in our home. I was in labor for only two hours and he had helped with the childbirth.

The roads turned in 1975. On April 12, 1975 my husband knew it was time for us to leave Svay Rieng and find shelter in the city. Maranet was 3-years-old now and I was six-months pregnant with my second child. I remember the day very clearly. It was the last time I saw my husband. He sent me on a plane and promised that we would meet up again in the city when he could get out. I saw him waving and he had tears in his eyes. It was just like that movie, "The Killing Fields." I knew how much he loved his children and never doubted that he would not come for us. When we got to Pochetong Airport in Phnom Penh bombs were falling like pebbles from the sky. I rushed to hear the news reports over the radio. Four hours after I touched down in the city, Svay Rieng was surrendered to the Khmer Rouge. I hoped my husband would be spared.

Five days after I arrived in Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge arrived and "liberated" the city. We were all told to go back to our hometowns. There was ten people in my group and I was pregnant still. We walked along for a month and a half before we reached Svay Rieng. The killings were already starting. As walked along the road we stepped over corpses which had either been people who could not make the trip or were killed and left on the roadside. I drank from ponds that had dead bodies floating in them.

Before we left on our journey, the Khmer Rouge had given us two-day's worth of rice and salt. They set up stations along the roadside and handed us more rice every five-six kilometers we walked. It was just enough rice to get us by. We fished in nearby ponds and picked vegetables that grew along the road. I was with my family and my brothers did all the fishing.

We finally got to a village on the outskirts of Svay Rieng and settled beneath a hut where the "old people" lived. The old people were the Khmer Rouge peasant families who were like village keepers in the commune. The first thing they asked for were volunteers who had been former students, teachers, soldiers, doctors or anyone with an education to help them on special assignments. My brother, who had worked for the Red Cross with Americans and was in his second year of university studies volunteered. My mother later discovered that they had sent him to a big labor camp down the road. The we ordered to dig up huge ditches and they were fed nothing. My mother-- she's a courageous woman--she, went up into the camp and asked the camp leader, she pleaded with him to see her son. They let her see him and when she did, she found his head was full of lice and he had been starving for days. She snuck grains into his hands. They couldn't say anything to each other. He worked at gunpoint. They just looked at each other.

While I was living in this village, I was surprised by a visit from my husband's uncle. It was May 1976 and he had come with news that my husband was still alive. All along I knew my hope was not left for vain. But strangely I had a bad premonition. My mother warned me not to go and I decided to stay with my mother instead of be reunited with my husband. I let my chance pass by.

I remember one day in 1977. Thirty people--all teachers, soldiers, doctors and nurses-- were gathered together for a big feast. They took all their utensils and burning wood and had a huge meal with the best foods, like lemongrass fish soup and roasted beef and fried fish. It all the foods I hadn't seen in two years. The Khmer Rouge fed them very well that night, but I knew they were to disappear the next day. And sure enough, the next day, when I went to the water well to fetch water, I found it full with floating bodies. I ran away full of fear, running in silence, afraid someone would hear me and punish me for seeing what I wasn't supposed to.

Thinking of food, I remember the things we lived on. We all ate at a community kitchen where we'd get our daily share of rice porridge which had more water than rice. I worked in the kitchen, chopping vegetables and roots. They fed us potatoes and roots on occasion. One day as I was chopping roots and I was so hungry my stomach churned. As I chopped I thought of stowing away the scraps of the roots, the tips that weren't being used for the group soup. I slipped them in my pocket, hoping no one would notice. Then a felt a hard thump on my back. I don't remember anything from that experience, but my mother told me I was unconscious for three days. My mother told me she prayed every day for my life and for my sanity. She said I would sit up and make strange noises then faint back again. I was stiff as a rock, my muscles were tight when I regained my consciousness. My poor children thought I was crazy. That was my first brush with death.

In that same year, I was almost killed again. You see, my family was one of two Chinese-Cambodian families and there was only four families who were pure Chinese, full-blooded Chinese. One night I saw a young group of Khmer Rouge soldiers, they must have been around 13 or 14 years old. These boys were holding ropes and knives in their hands and they took the four Chinese families and killed them. I know they killed them because the next day, I saw the same boys wearing the Chinese families' clothes.

Two weeks after that night, rumor circulated that our families were to be the next victims. The "old people" who lived above us came to us with the news. The old grandma whispered it to us, that there were plans to take away all the Chinese-Cambodians in the village. After she told us, she asked for our clothes. I gave them to her, thinking we'd have no use for them since we'd be dead soon anyway. That night at around seven in the evening, we heard horses coming toward our village. It was three men on horseback. But just as they entered our village, two men ran to them and told them to away. They told the men on horses that "Angkar Leou" had declared a decree to stop all killing! The whole village knew they had come for us and that they left without us. Oh, I can't tell you how relieved I was.

But it is August 20, 1978 when I celebrated my new life. I've celebrated it every year ever since. Early that morning, the Khmer Rouge woke me up at 4 a.m. and told me to bring my two daughters. We were scheduled for a meeting with "Angkar Thom," they told me. They took us to the kitchen area, where we meet with some 240 families who had come from four different villages. There must have been about 400 women and children there, who were all wives and children of former soldiers. Many of the women were dressed in their best clothes, because they knew they were going to die. They fed us with the best foods, just like they fed that group of people I had seen. I ate as I had never eaten before and I fed my kids until they were stuffed. The Khmer Rouge asked me what my husband used to do and I told him that he sold ice at the market. Even though, I knew I was going to die, I felt this urge to save myself from the situation. I went to talk to the Khmer Rouge village leaders and said smilingly, "This is a very nice meal you've planned, but why can't my whole family come with me?" The leader smiled and said nothing. Just then, my little brother came running into my arms, sobbing like a baby. It surprised me so much, I nearly yelled at him for risking his life just to come after me. But on seeing this the leader, told me to take him and my daughters back to the village. I was saved. I was so elated and joyous that as a ran back to the village, I felt like I was flying. I have never felt so grateful in my life. That day all 240 wives died with their children, I was the only one to survive from that massacre.

By the end of 1978, the Vietnamese had entered Svay Rieng and they reached Phnom Penh by January of 1979. When the Vietnamese came, our village's food stock had been exhausted. We had no rice, no salt and the harvest had been very bad that year. The Vietnamese asked us if we wanted better food and offered to take anyone to Phnom Penh to get new clothes. My family went to Svay Rieng.

It was when I returned to Svay Rieng in 1979 that I found my father-in-law. He told me the story of how my husband died. I don't want to tell you, because it is so gruesome. In 1975, my husband was taken in chains out his parent's home. One of his cousins, who had entered the Khmer Rouge forces, came in and dragged my husband out shouting at his parents and my husband, calling them "khmang," enemy. Enemy of the people, he said. Enemy of the regime. It was his first cousin. My mother-in-law died instantly of shock when my husband was taken away. She just died from all the trauma. My father-in- law saw the beating. My husband was beaten over the head with a thorny tree branch. His cousin pounded him again and again until his head cracked and blood seeped out. I cry every time I think of it. Until I heard the story from my father-in-law's lips, I always help the hope that my husband was alive. It is painful still when I think of him. I think of him all the time. But I had to live on for my daughters and the rest of my family.

Money was no longer valuable so we bartered gold for grains. My family and I thought of starting a business. We would make rice porridge and sell it in the streets. We sold rice porridge with fish for cans of rice which we then bartered for gold. Eventually we profited, supplying ourselves with a lot of grain and enough gold for us to sustain ourselves. Then another opportunity arose. A former physics/chemistry of mine and my brothers who escaped to Vietnam was back in Phnom Penh and recommended my brother for a teaching position at the university. So our family moved to Phnom Penh. Since we had learned Vietnamese when we were younger, we were given government positions. My brothers both worked for the Vietnamese. At one point, they wanted to send my brother to Hanoi, but our family was the idea so we had to escape to Battambang so we could make it to the Thai border. My two brothers and their families left first in mid-1979 and sent a letter when they reached the Thai camps.

In 1980, I went with my daughters and my mother. My mother was having serious problems with her kidney, so with the gold we earned from the porridge sales, we paid for her to have surgery. Three weeks after the surgery, we left for the border. Heng Samrin officials were already hounding us about my brothers, so it was time to leave. We went along Svay Si Sopon on bike. We melted down the gold we had left and inserted it in our anuses. The roads were very bumpy, so it was a very painful trip. It took a few days before we reached the gates into Khao-I-Dang. It rained the night we got to the gates, so we slept out in the rain and removed the gold then. When it was early morning, but still dark we crossed over the wall, first bribing the Thai guards to let us in.

My first impression of the camp was that there was so much water and plastic. So the first morning I was there I took a nice long shower, pouring all the water that was rationed to us in one sitting. I was wrong. Water was such a scarce commodity that a small jug was priced at a chunk of gold. I was foolish for wasting all that water.

I stayed in Khao-I-Dang for one year and I was a teacher while I was there. In 1982, we were transferred to Kampot for six months then to the Philippines in Bataan for six months to learn ESL and American lifestyle basics, like working a toilet. Then in March 16, 1983 my family and I arrived in America.

**Group 4**

**SAMEY POL POT: THE POL POT ERA--by Thida Mam**

My experiences during Samey Pol Pot (the Pol Pot Era) are not unique. Any survivor of the Cambodian Holocaust could share an equally horrific and sad story. As one of my countrymen so aptly said, 'It will take a river of ink to adequately describe the horror of our experience during the Pol Pot Era.'

Thida Mam Unknown to the populace in 1975, Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and their wives, Ta Mok, Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphon and a handful of cohorts followed their master plan to create a socialist utopia. Their seemingly noble goal, however was thrust upon us, the Khmer people, with no information about their ultimate goals and without our consent.

When the Khmer Rouge came to power, I was a fifteen year old school girl who cared little about politics and blindly trusted that Pol Pot and others wanted what was best for the people, that they'd fought the corrupted central government in order to fix what was wrong in our society. My first encounter with the Khmer Rouge was one of hostility, deception and violence. At gunpoint, the Khmer Rouge soldiers ordered all of us to leave our homes and abandon the city -- supposedly to escape being bombed by the Americans. We were confused and intimidated, and so, with no apparent compelling reason to resist their orders, we became a nation of homeless refugees overnight. By the time we realised that leaving the city had been a trick to strip us of our homes and our possessions, it was too late to resist. In a matter of days we'd become totally dependent on the Khmer Rouge for rice, for information, for our very survival.

Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and the others exploited our desire for peace after years of upheaval and civil war. We thought we wanted peace at any price, but we had no concept then that the price would be the destruction of all we held dear: our families, our culture, our sense of worth, our beautiful land, our lives.

When people were told that we could return to the countryside and help produce food, my family chose to go to our ancestral village, where as a young child, I'd spent many happy summers playing with cousins whose families still farmed there. From 1970 to 1975 we'd been unable to visit our relatives because of the war, so I looked forward to seeing my cousins again.

Two of my cousins eagerly helped me learn to farm and adapt to life under the new regime. Another cousin was a Khmer Rouge soldier, but he made a great effort to tell me how to be a good Khmer by the Khmer Rouge's definition. However, my fourth cousin had been effectively indoctrinated by the Khmer Rouge. He saw me as a useless person, a parasite, who needed to be reformed. He preached communist ideology to me endlessly. An honest, loyal comrade, dutiful to his communist teachings, he really believed the Khmer Rouge would bring about a good life with equality for all. He had devoted his life and soul to that cause. Two years later he and and his family of eleven people were murdered by those he'd faithfully served for so long. His crime? He had the misfortune to have been born to parents defined as 'Rich Farmers Who Exploited the Peasants,' although they were little more than peasants themselves.

Every year, the rice planting season was followed by the killing seasons. The Khmer Rouge ordered the relocation of thousands of families. Very few families were truly relocated to clear new land. Most ofthe trucks and ox carts containing these people were driven to mass graves in jungle clearings and deep wells.

In the killing season of 1978, a village leader rode his bike into the cotton plantation where I worked next to his fifteen-year old niece. He blandly told her that Angka Loeu ('The Organisation') needed to relocate her and her mother. As he peddled away with her on his bike, I knew, she knew, and he knew that she and her mother would be exterminated. A day later two girls from the another work crew were taken away by a horse cart by her village leader. I became so paranoid that I could not breathe when I saw any of the village leaders around. I dared not make eye contact with any leaders as if it could invite them to come to me and tell me that it was my turn. In the hot sun, I worked quietly and did not want to see anything around me or to hear any 'request'. I sprayed the insecticide on the cotton plants and watched the worms squirm, blacken and die, I felt hollow. I heard a faint voice calling for a girl who was working near me. It was her mother. We could not see her well against the sun, but her thin hand signalling her daughter to come with her. A day later, when I was eating lunch, my friend whispered to me that the girl, her mother, one sister and two brothers had committed suicide. They hung themselves from a mango tree which stood on the road to my village after they had learned that their names had been 'called by Angka'. Thereafter, my knees became weak each time I walked past the mango tree to reach my home.

A week later, my village leader came for my friend who slept next to me. As he walked her out, I felt relief that it was not me, but I felt so guilty that her death spared me for another day. A rumour arose a few days later that she was brutally raped before she died. I could not stand it, so I stole some poi- son that was used to kill insects in the field and kept it in my pocket. I was so afraid, not afraid of death because I did not want to live, but how much will it hurt before I died or that I may have to witness my mother's torture before our death. As the warm rain poured on me I was thankful as I had a chance to cry without getting caught by the Khmer Rouge. The phantom of suffering and death haunted me then and still haunts me now in my nightmare.

Many American friends, on learning of my past ask, 'Who are the Khmer Rouge? Why did they hate Cambodians? Where are they from?' I feel shame every time I have to explain that the word 'Khmer' is what the people of Cambodia are called. Although those monsters have a twisted ideology, they share the same blood as their victims. They are our own people. Somehow we created them, and Khmers have yet to fully under- stand how and to wonder if we are still doing it. I tell my friends a saying in my language which describes the Khmer Rouge: 'Dong Kov Cheag Pi Sacig Aagn,' - 'the worms from our own skin.' Our Cambodian nightmare continues because we do not know how much shame we should bear for having such brutal kin.

Whenever I think of the past, incredible pain washes over me and I'm thrust back to that era, reliving the terror as keenly as the day it happened. Everyday,in sad times or in triumph, my mother whispers, 'If only your father were alive...' It has been sixteen years since our escape, but I continue to live in fear that one day we will find out how my father was murdered. I don't know if my mother and I could stand it.

Most of us hate to talk about our painful past, so we try to bury it in order to be able to function on a day-to-day basis. In 1986, I visited cousins in France. Of their family of fifteen, only five survived. I asked how my aunt and other cousins died. Soon we were crying so hard that we could not finish our conversation. Ten years later, this cousin and her sister visited us in America. Once again I asked how my relatives died. She said her mother and a sister died of starvation two days apart. Then she told of the fate of her brother-in-law who had his arms tied behind him with red cord and forced to walk to the fresh ditches where he was clubbed and kicked into the ditch. She told how she herself had been tricked into a forest to be raped then murdered, but escaped with the help of her sister. At this point we were so upset that we promised that we would never talk about this to each other again as long as we live. To relive our life under Pol Pot is just as bad as living it As I tried to prepare this paper, I had to agree to relive parts of this past. I wanted to describe one event in detail to bring you, even momentarily, into that world. I wanted to explain how I, as young girl, felt when the Khmer Rouge took my father away from me. I wanted to share the moment when I believed I would never feel happiness again, but how do you put such things into words? How do you explain a fear that swallows you like quicksand? For three days, so few words came into my head, but so many tears poured from my eyes.

We Khmer try to forget and yet we must not. Our agony will never lessen or our healing really begin until justice has been meted out to the handful of Khmer Rouge leaders who conceived and oversaw the destruction of a culture and carried out the genocide of a fourth of their own countrymen. They have never been brought to trial or punished for their heinous crimes of mass murder, torture, and the rape of a nation. We owe it to those who died, and we owe it even more to our children and to the people of the world to never let the knowledge of this terrible holocaust be forgotten. It was a crime not only against Cambodians but against all of humanity.

Recently, Ieng Sary, whose hands are as bloody as Pol Pot's, has been granted amnesty by Cambodia's King Sihanouk and the Royal Government. I was sick to learn the news and deeply troubled by it. I remember that twenty-one years ago, when I, along with most other Khmer, felt that peace for Cambodia was so precious that all of us should be willing to pay the price, no matter how high that price might be. However, we found out that the price we paid was so high that we still cannot describe it in words. Now, once again, all Khmer are being asked to swallow this cost of 'peace and reconciliation.' My head tries to understand that maybe it is worth the price. To save the living perhaps we must turn our back on the dead. But my heart cries and cries because it hurts so bad just to think that we are choosing to be gullible, to walk into the same trap again. Will we never learn? I don't want to add to the price we all paid twenty years ago for Ieng Sary's version of peace. There are some crimes and some leaders in this world so monstrous that amnesty simply cannot be granted by a civilized world.

If our current Khmer leaders are not willing to put their thirst for wealth and power aside and bring the Khmer Rouge leaders to justice, then we must plead with the good people of the world and the world court to hold them accountable by trying them for their crimes against humanity. The damage caused by granting amnesty to such a man is no different from having given amnesty to Hitler - unthinkable! Ieng Sary's pardon is an affront to the world. Such an act not only adds to the ongoing torture of victims like me, but it sets a precedent that other Khmer leaders of yesterday, today, and tomorrow need not fear reprisals for their deeds.

I dedicate this plea on behalf of my father and the millions of other victims of the Cambodian Killing Fields.

-- 1997

Thida B. Mam is now a US Citizen and an active member of the Cambodian community of San Jose, California, where she lives with her husband, daughter, and son. This article is excerpted from David Chandler's book, Cambodia: Power, Myth, and Memory. This edited version originally appeared in "Called by Angka," a publication of the International Network on Holocaust and Genocide, and was edited by David Young. We would like to thank Thida Mam for permission to reprint the article.

**Group 5**

**LETTER FROM A KHMER AMPUTEE--By Hay Loeuth**

I want to tell you about the suffering which struck my heart and I cannot rid myself of. When I, an amputee, was grief stricken and those around me were cheerful and happy, how miserable I was. I had no strength to struggle and continue to exist in this world. My heart was either full of sorrow or hopelessness. Living for what? Just a little food to fill the hungry stomach and waiting for the end of the day. But I wanted to tell you about my feeling after my legs were blown off by a mine.

Amputee, Neak Luong I lost all my sense of being and self-esteem and filled myself instead with cowardice, fear, and despair. I did not want to live. The words wouldn't stop ringing in my ears: "I am an amputee." There is no reason for living found in these words.

Filled with sorrow, shame, and humility at being discounted by other people.

Difficulty both physically and psychologically. Nothing to smile about, so never smiling.

Always under stress from the disregard of other people. Like living in a hell.

Living like a reptile which hides its face when it meets other animals or men, like a bird that gets its food from the female or like the kind of tree that grows on another tree. That's why others are frustrated and disregard me. I am a parasite. Everything that I could do before, walk, stand, sit, jump, run; I can do no more. Whenever I was in a group of people, I looked at myself and saw that I was the ugliest one of all.

If I had money (500 riels or so) and went to the store (on my bottom of course) to buy something to eat, the owner yelled at me to go away. How humiliated I was. They said that they were just opening the shop and so had nothing to give me. Oh God! How ashamed I was! I had entered the shop to buy not to beg, but they did not welcome me as any customer but as a beggar. I had money to pay them, but they took me for a beggar. I was a beggar! The heart of the amputee is filled with nothing but sorrow and shame. That is the gift of war and land mines to the amputee.

Every day there are only two words ringing in my ears: "Kyum chhunpika: I am an amputee." It seems like lightning and thunder striking my head from eight directions. My ears ring, my vision blurs, my throat tightens and there's a pain in my chest. Oh, Lord, show me the way to go, wither to struggle living in this dark world with no way, or just to leave it.

Forget about the possibility of heavy labor to earn a living like field or factory work, just to walk, or lie down to sleep or go to the bathroom is difficult or impossible for me, so how could I earn a living: there is no money to start up a business or no relatives to depend on for support. No way.

If I really wanted to work in the fields to grow rice or vegetables, it's miserable to my legs and arms which were blown off by a land mine. But I try to encourage myself that my legs and arms will grow back after Cambodia achieves peace and thinks about the social welfare of her people and not about greedy power. I dream that if it is like this I will be happy and try to be a good citizen in that society. Now so-called peace has arrived, but my legs and arms have still not grown back. How come? I have seen a crab and it can grow back it legs, also the earthworm can still survive if part of its body is broken off. But what happens to the legs and arms! When will they grow back?

So while waiting to grow back my arms and legs, my stomach feels hungry. It shouts for food. I am famished. What will I do to fill my hungry stomach? I will beg, which is full of shame. I will be chided and reproached and looked down on by others who don't care. I try to be patient and endure the bad fate which I face. I even cry. I cry with no tears. I even shout, a voiceless shout. But there is no mercy. I go begging everywhere, at the market, in restaurants, at the train station... everywhere I go I compare myself to others. They have happy faces, wear nice clothes, have smooth skin and smell good while I am soiled, have skin cut and scraped, I smell so awful and crawl around on my bottom, covered only by old khaki shorts. Mud cakes me and flies swarm around. I raise my hands together in respect to everyone who passes, even to those younger than me, to ask for some charity.

Note: The letter above, composed by Hay Loeuth, was originally written to the Campaign for Peace and Reconciliation (CPR), a voluntary agency working to aid war victims in Cambodia. As of 1996, the CPR's Bangkok office was at 87/2 Soi 15, Sukhumvit Rd, Bangkok 10110, Thailand, and the Cambodia office was at PO Box 144, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, phone 855-236-4205. The organization is apparently no longer active.

**Group 6**

**Confronting the Past--by Vorak Ny**

The 2006 Khmer New Year marked the 31st anniversary of the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge. That date - April 17, 1975 - marked the beginning of great suffering for my generation and left the nation drowning in a sea of infamy. Cambodians are still trying to measure the depth of their losses and the nation still feels the effects of the regime.

On April 22, 2006, I woke up with a vision. After a two-hour ride in a cramped taxi, I returned to Chrey village, where I had lived in fear nearly 30 years ago. It was the same month that my family was relocated to Mong Russey and settled in this village among people we never knew. We remained there until the regime collapsed in 1978.

As I stepped out of the car in Mong Russey and felt my foot touching the ground, I was instantly reminded of standing to wait for instructions from the Khmer Rouge. It made me feel strange in a way I cannot explain. I was alone in a familiar place.

I stood watching the taxi depart north to Battambang; I was on the very spot where my family stood many years ago. The road seemed wider and there were fewer trees; it was now filled with food stalls and waiting moto-dops. Gone was the roadblock erected across the national road during the regime to prevent people from traveling. Now, there were more houses along the road, Mong Market had been reopened, and there was a health clinic across from the pagoda where my brother Dara died.

As soon as I stepped off the paved road, I began to feel that I was back where I left off more than thirty years ago. I began looking for familiar faces and names, like that of my brother Omarith who disappeared while building a dam in 1977.

My first thought was to look for the dam. Just before the Vietnamese invaded, the floodgates had been brought in by ox cart and truck; they were to be installed and tested for the rainy season, just few months away.

I stood on the edge of the bank looking at a man taking a bath and washing his clothes, thinking how I once took part in building the dam. I remember standing in line, passing baskets full of dirt to the next person 50 meters away. A man named Ry oversaw this part of the project. While he was supervising, cadre Shay usually wandered around smoking and yelling at people, who were compelled to listen to revolutionary songs that were broadcast over loudspeakers. My twin brother Phal was in a different group further down along the dam.

Looking around for something that might be recognizable, I saw that the giant por tree on the opposite riverbank was still standing; it is no taller, but it is aging. Behind it are two small buildings: one older one of wood and a brick office building that is under construction. Chey Pagoda has been rebuilt with contributions from Cambodians living in the US and France. They dedicated many of the stupas and Buddhist shrines to their lost family members.

On the opposite bank, a health clinic has replaced the community center built in early 1976. This was where the Khmer Rouge detained Bunthan before sending him to his death, presumably at Wat Tom Ma Yut.

By this time, many memories began to reappear: the trees I climbed, ponds I swam in, and places where I hid things from the eyes of the Khmer Rouge.

As I crossed the river, the first person who came to mind was cadre Daz, his wife, and their two sons, Tuy and Roun, but there was no trace of them. Along the dirt road leading to our hut, I began asking villagers about the people I had known. Many of them gave conflicting accounts. If my memory served me well, I recognized the five palm trees that were behind our thatched hut. One morning, a man fell to his death while trying to cut off leaves to make a roof for his hut. Across the road was the house where cadre Daz had lived, and to the right was cadre Soth's house.

Our first hut was about 6 by 8 feet and stood a foot off the ground. To me it was simply a place to sleep (it had no kitchen). Every rainy season the floods would reach within an inch of our house. During the first few months we were there, I would sit in the hut, swinging my feet, looking around at the neighbors and enjoying my time. My mother cleared an area near the house and began planting mints and vegetables, and putting up fences to protect her garden from chickens and intruders. But most important, this was the way she marked her sanctuary.

Living in a world without color is unimaginable. But by 1976, anything that nature didn't kill, the Khmer Rouge did. Chrey village has fertile soil and a river, which made it easy to plant rice, corn, potatoes and a rich assortment of citrus and other fruits, giving farmers not only good harvests but also plenty of fish and fresh water year-round. But as the days turned into weeks and years, I sat in the hut and watched the leaves gradually disappear from the trees.

By late 1977, as more people died, Chrey village also became like a graveyard. At night the village was dark and lonely, left entirely to wild dogs roaming and howling, and scavenging for food. My mother spent most nights alone, afraid for her life. She remained there until the village was regrouped as people scattered in a 2-3 kilometer radius of the village.

For nearly four years, the thatched hut in Chrey village was my whole world. The regime taught me to never wander anywhere unless instructed otherwise. Almost every day, with friends and foes alike, I struggled to live for a bowl of rice. But it was always clear to me that a home is a home: a concept laden with significance in Khmer culture. And, of course, I wanted to be close to my mother and the knowledge that she was alive comforted me.

A half block from our hut was a medicine station where traditional herbs and roots were made into medicines for the sick. I went there a few dozen times for medicine, not because I was sick, but because sometimes the medicines were made with palm sugar and I needed the carbohydrates for strength. Also, Kan and I often stole mangoes from a giant tree every time there was a rainstorm.

It took an effort to walk to the field behind the tree line. I stood and looked out to area where I think my twin brother Phal's grave is. I sense his presence all the time. I feel closer to him now than ever before. I recognized a fruit tree, but further down, the small pond where my brother and I used to swim is no longer there. There are many places carved out in my memory. They all here, except the people I lost; they, like my 14-year old twin, cannot be replaced.

Phal was the first death in our family at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. When he died, I was too worn out to be sad, so I just cradled his head in my arms. Two nurses immediately began digging his grave, wanting to buy him as quickly as possible. While they were digging, I leaned close to him and grabbed his cool and pale hands. I said "please don't leave me." I must have looked odd. I wasn't crying. Inside I felt somewhat at peace. His face told me that he was no longer in pain.

Everything felt so wrong, and I had no idea of how to make it better; everything was dreamlike and indistinct. Five of us - the two nurses, my mother, my sister, and me - gave our last condolences, surrounded by bushes and freshly dug graves. The anguish in my mother's face was plain. My sister Amarine was speechless. Something fundamental had died in Chrey that day. I lost a brother.

That sinking feeling lasted for nearly a year. At night, when I lay awake, I missed him and regretted things I hadn't said or done. I imagined his soul drifting closer and closer to heaven, his final resting place, and I also felt that a part of me was drifting further away from him. The world was very beautiful at that hour, and the night usually comforted me. The darkness made things less painful, and Phnom Penh felt very near.

Back inside the makeshift hospital, on Phal's bed, which my mother had shared with him during his last few nights, his clothes were still warm 15 minutes after his burial. His small cloth bag, which he used to wear across his shoulder, hung at the end of the bed on a bamboo pole. A few of his personal belongings were still inside: his aluminum spoon, a tin milk can, a few crumbs of rock salt, dried rice, his red and white checked karma, and a filthy but beautiful long-sleeved shirt. Now that we had done everything in our power, my mother gave his belongings to those who needed them and left the hospital.

Many thoughts went through my mind in Chrey village. An appealing one is that I want a place closer to him, perhaps a small plot of land with a small house, and to start a life here. In the meantime, on my mother's next visit, we plan to erect a Buddhist shrine at Wat Chrey in memory of our lost family members.

There seem to be more inhabitants in Chrey than when I left in 1978. People I used to know have relocated or died. Among the many faces in the village are the sons and daughters of former Khmer Rouge. Many others left, just like us. Some went to the cities seeking work. One villager asked me when I left Chrey. I had to pause for a minute, for it seemed I had been there all of my life. At that moment, America and Phnom Penh were something I could only imagine.

I traveled along the dam to Ream Kun village where Wat Tom Ma Yut, a notorious detention and torture site, is located. By design, this vast plain stretching to the national road will be submerged when the floodgates close, taking all of the farmland and its people with it.

Wat Por compound, the makeshift hospital where my brother Dara spent his final days, had been rebuilt and converted into classrooms. Next to it is a small tin-roofed shack that was used as a kitchen and sleeping quarters for nurses and guards during the regime. Today, it is an administrative building. A vegetable plot has been turned into a school garden with a flag pole. A small pond nearby was said to have been used as a burial site during the regime. Today it has been filled in. I sat on the school bench for long time and looked around, trying to figure out the exact location where Dara might be buried. Something told me that he is here.

Dara was the youngest boy in our family; he was born in 1965. Polio had left him paralyzed from the waist down. The Khmer Rouge felt that people who were physically or mentally impaired were unfit for the regime, and they attempted to kill him on at least one occasion. My mother begged them to spare his life. A few days later, Dara tied a log onto his waist and dragged it as the Khmer Rouge looked on. This act alone may have saved him from an early execution.

I then went to Mong Russey train station, where Phal and I once followed the ox carts that were transporting rice to the waiting trains. The station is run down and filthy. Villagers have taken over the passenger waiting area and ticket booth as shelter, while the loading dock and barber shop are abandoned. The rice warehouse is still operating, though. During the regime, I stole rice from this warehouse, then snuck into the woods across the road and back to Chrey village.

Under the searing heat of April, I looked at my watch; it was 2:42 pm. I thought I had seen everything I wanted to see. My next stop was Battambang town, where I visited the school my brothers and I shared for a few years before the Khmer Rouge shut it down in 1975.

The house where we had lived for two years was gone; only an empty lot remains. The land is up for sale, along with three other empty lots surrounding it.

I went back to Doun Teav, where the boat dropped us off, and headed down the Sangké River. I only recognized a few places. Doun Teave Lycce, where we took refuge for several nights, has been remodeled and given a coat of fresh paint.

I have learned about the horrors of Auschwitz, the Nazi's mastermind Adolph Hitler, and victims like Ann Frank, but nothing compares to what I saw at Tuol Sleng (S-21). My suspicions about the brutal murders that took place there have been confirmed by many outsiders like the journalist for Australia's Daily Mirror John Pilger, who called Pol Pot an "Asian Hitler" in his article "Echo of Auschwitz." I thank him and others for their courage to write about the regime: Chanrithy Him (When Broken Glass Floats), Dith Pran (founder and president of The Dith Pran Holocaust Awareness Project), Vann Nath (A Cambodian Prison Portrait), and Loung Ung (First They Killed My Father). And acknowledgment is due to the Documentation Center of Cambodia's Director Youk Chhang and its entire staff for their pursuit of justice.

The first full account I read of the atrocities committed in Cambodia was an article in Reader's Digest: "Murder of a Gentle Land" by Anthony Paul and John Barron, followed by Cambodge Année Zéro by François Ponchaud, a then a more detailed account by William Shawcross, Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia.

I read and reread them, making sure that I won't forget those who died. I lost three bothers and two sisters to the Khmer Rouge. Two of them - one with two children and the other who had a son and was six months pregnant in late 1976 - were executed. Two of my brothers died of starvation and disease at Chrey village in 1977-1978. And one went missing and is presumed dead.

The disappearance of my brother remains as fresh for me today as it did then. My mother still lives with the agony she feels over his disappearance in mid-1977. Although we remained hopeful for some years that he might resurface, it is painful today to look back at those moments of optimism.

Most Cambodians having seen the killing fields, but it is difficult for me to accept that my brother is among the victims there. Since I returned to Phnom Penh in October 2003, I have visited and revisited the Tuol Sleng torture center, hoping not to find his picture there, but to learn more about the regime that remains shrouded in secrecy.

Was my brother caught and brought here to face charges or could he have died here? I walk from cell to cell, and when I reach the gallery where photographs of victims are displayed along with implements of torture, I look at them and see things I witnessed during the regime. This experience has had a disturbing effect on me. Many of the methods the Khmer Rouge used to curb dissent proved to be similarly ferocious in Chrey region.

My brother left Chrey village as he lived in it, fearless of death. His fate was determined by the immutability of his character, which came predictably to one who was defiant and confident in his judgments, knowing there was no hope of success against such overwhelming odds.

Over the years, I began to speak out more about him. Recently, two men, one in his fifties and one around my age, claimed to have had lived in Chrey village in those years and knew the area quite well. But no one knew or heard of my brother's whereabouts.

His days with us were short, and I hope that his disappearance from our life would justify the cause of freedom and the life he sought to live. My brother Omarith was just seventeen years old.

Soon after the Vietnamese invasion, my father went back to the village in Kampong Cham where he stayed during the regime. His hut was left untouched; the banana and papaya trees nearby were ripe, and the grass around the hut was about knee-high. Looking from a distance, he felt convinced that someone was still living there and waiting inside the hut! The door was ajar so he stepped inside, where he saw writing on the wall: "I love you father." It appeared to be the writing of my sister Chanthou Reth. My father sat there recollecting for a while, and moved on.

The Khmer Rouge robbed me of a father during my childhood. My father loved us unconditionally, and family bonding was most important to him. Although we have been apart since I was a child, because of war and many unfortunate circumstances, I have always had a sense of him being with me.

He taught us to love and to support your country, its purpose, its past, and its destination. His wonderful sense of optimism gave me the greatest challenge in life, but the fear of growing up disappointing him always weighed strongly in my heart and mind.

My father shared with us his love of public works, and I obviously have inherited the same way in a sense. All my conscious life, my father seemed involved in public life. He handed Cambodia down to me as though it was my inheritance alone. His commitment to Cambodia has given me a reason to continue.

He left Cambodia, only to pursue new projects working with the Humanitarian Relief Project, International Red Cross, and working earnestly with the Cambodian Communities. I can think of no more honorable act than his current deeds, helping the rebuilding process in his former war-torn country.

Cambodia has always been a "Distant Land of My Father." To him, leaving Cambodia for France was abhorrent to every instinct in his body. He has seen war and destruction in his life, and I think this experience affected him greatly, now my life; I intend to do my part so that my children and future Cambodians may live in peace.

My parents' love and affection has been the most prevalent thing in my life, and they gave their children unconditional love, and let us chart our own path in life. That's the greatest gift a parent can bestow upon their children.

Now that I am a father myself, I am able to understand the difficulty of overcoming the loss, separation, and responsibility.

Fate has been kind to Cambodia, but costly, considering the numbers: thirty years of war, millions killed. Our modern history has been one of ongoing tragedy and the fallout has been our national sadness; the senseless loss of life will be felt for generations to come. But I hope history will teach us some lessons. Indeed, the Khmer Rouge regime marked a turning point for all of us, and change requires commitment and sacrifice. We can only make the changes needed if our consciences are clear and we have a sense of unity as a nation.

Cambodia has fundamentally changed since April 17 brought a permanent catastrophe to the nation. I also understand those not wanting to hear and be reminded of our country's bitter past, because I too woke up with a feeling of denial: that April 17th never took place. How can this day be remembered? As a Cambodian, I must not forget. Part of me died along with it, systematically murdered by the Khmer Rouge.

Most nations denounce war as a way of settling things. For Cambodians, more time must pass. Meanwhile, we can begin to form our own judgments through the experiences of all pasts: ours and those of others. I hope the result will give each of us clear guidance that might become a model for future Cambodians. With this, I can honestly say that the Cambodian people stand at the dawn of a new era, with unprecedented opportunities and the rebirth of idealism in each and every individual. I want nothing more than to see this country prosper and united in peace.

Some people were forced to collect themselves and moved on with life. But no one was excluded from pain; those survived the pain swallowed it. One of the legacies of war and armed conflict in my time is the proportion of the population who lost one or more of their siblings. Further, most of them did not leave home voluntarily and died in terrible and never fully-explained circumstances.

My mother turned 81 years old this year; she is physically and emotionally exhausted. Her voice is faltering and her eyes blurring. She sat listening patiently and looking at the pictures of her children - most of who died miserably - and of the places she once lived. I'm sure that all these pictures aroused both good and bad memories of her experiences. I realized that she is trying to come to terms with all her losses and tragedies, and I know that she is halfway there.

In Kampong Cham, the details of how my two sisters were murdered remain hidden. The questions are endless and will forever remain unanswered. People claimed to have heard loud revolutionary music played in Kampong Cham when executions were carried out.

Everyone's life is a story in itself. And every one of those stories tells of constant changes. My own life is no exception. As a Cambodian, I'm trying to understand Cambodia, which always seemed lost and remains obscure for the most part. After decades of living in America, it is still a comfort when I'm thinking of those stories and read them to remind me of my past and my future, which is now shaped by it.

During my years in the US, I have been working on a book project. I started writing it for my family. Most of it draws heavily on my memories; they are so personal that I often can't finish a paragraph for days. In many ways, it afflicts my life. I think best with paper and pen, and then the Laptop came along… As my work progresses, I think of others, like those died without having their voices heard and stories told. In certain ways, they had much less freedom.

Writing this book about Cambodia is a unique challenge to both the heart and mind. You can read it in the way you understand life. For those who lived through Cambodia's conflicts and endured the Khmer Rouge, it can help remind us now and then to tell the world of what had occurred and not to repeat this act. I have narrowed the title of this book to "The Bare-Hands Doctrine, 1975 The Odd Year." It may be controversial, but it focuses essentially on all Cambodians living globally as one.

In 1984, while I was living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, I firmed up my goal to write this book. By 1998 I was in Kirkland, Washington, where I began the project by gathering notes and collecting memories. For years, I put these thoughts into words on scraps of paper and shared them with no one! Those notes have been the primary sources for this book. This work cannot be easily accomplished in days or months; it will take years to recollect my lost and obscured memories.

As I write, those notes and memories constantly remind me what I need to remember, including the possibility that those who committed the killings might someday read my book. Putting into words the lives of people who are engraved indelibly in the archives of my memory will be a long journey with many obstacles and uncertainties. But I am not in any hurry and I desperately hope that all my fellow Cambodians are following the same path.

I continued writing and sharing my stories with others, especially the survivors, people with different lives, backgrounds, and experiences. In many ways, I discovered that when we're all sharing and in search for peace and love, we receive love in return. So gradually, this book became filled with conversations, arguments, and revelations from Cambodians, so that now, it is more than just my story. It contains the very private thoughts of my people, and I hope to show my gratitude to them by reflecting their thoughts in the book. It seems that the book is a story without an end.

But there is a purpose for writing it. The stories it contains are not simply about names; they are the memories that are still alive our hearts.

It is not my intent write an autobiography. Instead, I want to focus on the recent past: on my generation at the beginning of what the Khmer Rouge called "Year-Zero": Thursday April 17, 1975. The old way of life ceased to exist, and the Khmer Rouge began their quest to fulfill their revolution. I write about this not in the spirit of vengeance, but in an attempt to convey the reality of that era.

The story begins where the human spirit ends. It will tell of the struggle of living in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. As the author, I am not consciously seeking fame and glory. For the sake of literature, I wish to write a good story about Cambodia for future generations, and for those who have touched my life and given it meaning.

The Khmer Rouge era was extraordinary. It was not an ordinary time for Cambodians to remember; it marked a time when ideology took a collision course toward self-annihilation. After it ended Cambodia became known to the outside world by such terms as auto-genocide, Asian Auschwitz, Pol Pot, an Asian Hitler, Asian Holocaust, Echo of Auschwitz, Murder, the Nazi Style, Tuol Sleng, and as the Vietnamese publicly proclaimed: "A land of blood and tears, hell on earth" before its invasion in 1978.

In a May 9, 2003 interview on National Public Radio, actor John Malkovich (who was in the film The Killing Fields) called Cambodia a "hollow proposition." Former US President Jimmy Carter characterized the regime as "the world's worst violators of human rights." British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once called genocide "the crime without name." That's Cambodia! Public opinion surveys paint a similar picture about Cambodia. Perhaps this book will help remind us of what actually happened.

History does repeat itself. The world stood by silently as the genocide of World War II reoccurred 30 years later in Cambodia. How did the world allow this to happen? The Nazi Germans and the Khmer Rouge were both were capable of brutal acts that altered the nature of trust and honesty in people. Ironically, Oscar Schindler (Germany) and cadre Koeuth (Cambodia) were two good people among many bad ones, and saved many lives.

Three decades later, the decision to prosecute a few aging Khmer Rouge leaders remains more controversial, especially if we are considering a post-World War II Nuremberg-style tribunal.

As for me, I read and reread the notes from my book. There is much that I have worked hard to forget, and recalling the Khmer Rouge regime is painful. I read my notes as though they could save me. And they probably did, in a way. My sister remembered little of what happened. In many ways, she is trying to forget and move on with her life.

The dam where the Mong and Chrey Rivers meet will serve as a constant reminder of the past and the future. It will stand as a solemn testimony for those who built it under the Bare-Hands Doctrine.

The world has changed in the 60 years since the Nuremburg trials. With the Khmer Rouge tribunal now in place, I can only hope that justice will find its place and a new chapter can open. My visit to Chrey helped me recall happy times, and above all, it preserves the voices and faces of my family who I dearly love. Writing helps me bring back those I lost.

**Group 7**

**The Reprieve--by Sophia Srey and Bruce Sharp**

In 1977, Sophia Srey Sharp was seventeen years old, working with a group digging canals and building dikes in Prey Veng province. Everyone called her by her nickname, Srey. She had been evacuated from Phnom Penh, and had been sent to Phum Kok Thom, the "Big Hill Village." The cadre in Phum Kok Thom was strict and short-tempered. Each night everyone in the village was required to attend a meeting at which the cadre would speak about the wisdom of Angkar, and the necessity of working hard. He would often detail exactly how many meters of earth they had moved during the day, and how much more work remained to be done.

From time to time people disappeared from the village; the cadre did not talk about what had happened to them, and no one dared to ask.

When their work area was far from the village, they would set up temporary shelters near the work site, eating and sleeping there until the project was completed. They were given one hour for lunch, and most of the workers in the group would eat quickly and try to lay down briefly before returning to the field. One afternoon Srey had laid down on a crude bench; a friend saw her resting there and came to sit beside her. But the benchtop was fashioned from a pair of unsecured planks, and when she sat down the planks buckled together, pinching Srey's bare foot and tearing the skin off of the underside of one toe. It bled profusely; the young woman soldier who served as the "doctor" for the group cleaned the wound and wrapped Srey's foot with a bandage of torn cloth. Srey walked back to work slowly. She had no shoes, and the trip back to the field, which took most of the group fifteen minutes, took her almost half an hour. Each step was painful.

After two weeks, the wound had still not healed. Every day she left lunch early to try to make it back to the field at the same time as the other workers, but in the morning there was no way to keep up. Everyone left in a single group as soon as it became light, and she was always the last one to the field.

On one evening, everyone had gathered to listen to the cadre's nightly speech, and Srey sat in the middle of a long line of exhausted women, fighting off the urge to sleep. The cadre began by naming one young woman who had stolen a skirt. The woman was one of the "old people," not one of the evacuees from the city, and it was rare to hear the "old people" criticized. But the cadre's anger was obvious. He stared straight into the woman's face and gestured out toward the rice fields. "Maybe you want to sleep out there?" he asked. A hush fell over the listeners: two hundred people, dead silent, because every one of them knew what his question really meant. The cadre then turned to another young man. The man had jokingly referred to the homemade medicine used by the Khmer Rouge as "rabbit shit." "You look down on Angkar's medicine?" he asked. "Maybe you look down on Angkar, too? I have a place for you." He pointed out toward the shallow canals that cut through the fields. "It's easy for me. I don't even have to dig a new hole."

The cadre paused briefly, letting his words soak in before he continued. Then he called out one more name:

"Neary Srey Phum Kok Thom."

Srey did not just hear her name: she felt it, like the hard impact of a shovel to the back of her head, a chill that tore her heart away and left her hollow inside. From a few rows away, she could see her brother turn toward her in horror, his eyes asking: What did you do??

The cadre looked down at Srey. "Neary Srey..." he said. "I watch you every day." He paused.

"You are a hard worker," he said. "Even though you are hurt, you still go to work every day, and you never complain."

Srey felt her heart begin to beat again as relief washed over her. Her brother smiled broadly. The cadre continued talking, discussing how they must all learn to follow the example set by such hard workers, how they should all forget their own problems and concentrate on serving Angkar.

The next morning the cadre gave Srey the day off. It was a luxury rarely afforded to anyone. For Srey, the moment she heard her name is still burned into her memory. She heard a death sentence in one breath, and a reprieve in the next.

**A Cambodian Life-The following article was written by Sophia Srey Sharp (b. 1960) for a 1993 ESL class.**

When I was young my life was easy, and I was happy.

My father was a customs agent. My parents divorced when I was a baby. I had a brother and a sister. At that time I had a beautiful life. I could go to school, and I had everything I need.

In 1970 Cambodia's civil war started. A lot of people were homeless, and lost their family, but my family was lucky because we lived in the city, and there wasn't much fighting. Although I was young, I felt upset when I saw the people who had lost their family and I was afraid that my family would get hurt, too.

Near the end of the war, in 1974, my father was sent to work in Battambang province. My brother, my sister and I stayed in Phnom Penh. My brother was eighteen so he could take care of us and my father sent us money.

In 1975 the civil war ended. All the people were happy and were hopeful. We thought we would have freedom but we were wrong. The Khmer Rouge ordered everyone to evacuate the city. Everyone had to live in the country. My family and my grand parents' family want to the town where they were born. It was about 65 miles from the city to that town. We had to walk all that way - no cars, no buses, no bicycles. We had them, but the Khmer Rouge wouldn't let anyone use them. My grandparent’s family and my family totaled 15 persons. After two days, the Khmer Rouge told us we couldn't stay in that town. My uncle had been a second lieutenant in the police. The Khmer Rouge took him away, and they said that they wanted to teach him about the politics. It wasn't true. They took him and they killed him.

We moved to the different place. I thought I would be able to go back to the city and study after a short time. From day to day I waited.

During the Khmer Rouge rule all the people from the city had to work hard, just like me. I had never work in the rice fields. When I worked I always got criticized by the old people (the people who supported the Khmer Rouge). In the Khmer Rouge time I had only two outfits of old clothing. I didn't have a blanket or shoes because the Khmer Rouge took everything. My brother, and my grandparents' family were killed in 1978 by the Khmer Rouge. Now I have only my sister and my cousin. Our lives were very, very hard.

In 1979 Vietnamese soldiers went to Cambodia and installed a new government, it was communist, too, but better than the Khmer Rouge. After that I lived with my relatives. I wish I could go to school, and I could find my father, too.

In 1981 my sister got married, and in 1985 I applied for a new job. I became a teacher, but my life still very difficult. In 1990 I met a man whose wife was a friend of my family before the war. They sponsored me to come to the USA. I waited two years to be processed by Immigration. When I got the news that I could come to the USA, I felt excited. Some of my friends said they felt happy for me, but other friends criticized me, because they said I didn't love my country. But I wanted to be happy.

On April 9, '92, I arrived in Chicago. Everything here is different, so I have to learn American customs, and language, and learn about the American way of life. But America isn't like I expect it to be. I have been one year but I still can't find a job. But I still hopeful.

**Group 8**

**Looking Back: A Refugee Remembers Cambodia--by Jim Yost**

For thousands of Cambodian-Americans, April 1975 has many connotations. One such Khmer is Salatha Mok. Salatha, or Sally, is a resident of Houston, Texas, and has adapted well to her American home and society since her resettlement there in 1981. But, like many Cambodian-Americans who are old enough to remember life before and during the days of the "killing fields," she lives every day with emotional complexities that few non-Cambodians will ever understand.

Now an office manager, and a part-time college student nearing her Bachelor's Degree, Sally was a college-trained primary school teacher in Phnom Penh in 1975. She still utilizes those skills as a Sunday school teacher, something she enjoys very much. But there are times when her teaching brings back memories of a former life.

"I can be teaching a lesson, looking at my class, in their American clothes, and speaking English, and then I look at their little faces... they are the same faces that I looked upon as a young teacher in Phnom Penh," she says. "The memories come back... riding to the school in the military dump-truck to protect us from Khmer Rouge grenades and rockets, the terrorist attacks on the schools, and the day the American flag was lowered at the U.S. Embassy in April of 1975. Sometimes I wonder and dream about my children in my classes... did they survive?

"But then again, perhaps sometimes I think it is better that I do not know... I keep them always in my prayers."

There are many places around Houston and the Galveston Bay area that bear a strong resemblence to some parts of Cambodia. "Bay Area Park in the spring and summer looks very much like some of the beautiful park areas on the lakes and near the Mekong river in Phnom Penh," Sally says. "On a summer evening, when a warm wind is blowing across the lake, I can visualize the happier times of my youth, picnics, outings with family and friends, and the festivals. We had such good times, and such simple pleasures. The culture shock of America was a drastic change for many of us. Here, society drives for more, faster, bigger, and more expensive. The trips to the park help me to relax sometimes, but here, too, a sense of sadness sometimes fills me when my mind journeys back in time."

For most Americans, grocery shopping is considered a necessary burden. But most Cambodian-Americans, like Sally, look at a trip to the market from a different perspective. She says, "Going to the market was always fun... the variety, the smells, the bargaining, I look forward to all of these. Although Houston has some well-stocked Asian markets, nothing will ever compare to the markets back in Phnom Penh, at least as far as sentimental value is concerned. Nowadays, much of what we buy is canned or frozen. That's OK for convenience, but sometimes I really miss the liveliness of the open-air markets around Phnom Penh, especially before 1975. After early 1975, the war began to affect our market food stocks very severely. It was a very ominous sign of things to come. Soon we would all be grateful for even a spoonful of rice. I think that is why survivors of the 'killing fields' appreciate food so much. Because we went so long with so little we don't take food for granted. A full stomach is a blessing. I can never forget what starvation feels like or what it does to a human being."

Sally has returned to Cambodia twice, as a missionary worker, in 1991 and 1992. In addition, she and her younger sister have saved enough to pay for a trip by their only surviving sister to come to visit them in Houston, a reunion that took twenty years to come about. Sally and Salany did not even know that their sister, Mok Lach, was even alive until 1983.

"I have known what it is like to live in relative paradise, and I have also known what it must be like to live in hell," she says. "All that is precious to a Cambodian, our culture, our tradition, our ancient history, was almost lost forever at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. I saw innocence itself die, along with millions of innocent people who committed no crime but to be alive and in the path of a genocidal movement.

"As a Cambodian-American I have learned the importance and the value of freedom, that it must be protected and cherished, and never taken for granted. When your freedom is lost, the soul dies, the body is but a hollow vessel. Cambodia and its most precious resource, her people, were brought down to absolute emptiness by what transpired between 1975 and 1979. I pray that we, the Khmer-Americans, can help fill the reservoir of the soul of our homeland, with the essence of freedom, wisdom from the past, and hope for the future."

Often, the proclamation "Never again," is associated with the Nazi holocaust. The Cambodian holocaust was the test of the world's commitment to "Never again." The free world failed the test, and the Cambodian people paid, and continue to pay the price to this very day. Listen to the Cambodian survivors, and to the echoes of the killing fields.

**Narath Tan: The Art of Survival--by Bruce Sharp**

His studio is a single room in a worn brick and terra cotta building next to one of Chicago's "L" train stops. It is on the second floor -- above the liquor store, below the professional wrestling school -- behind an unmarked door. At first, conversation in the room stops each time the train rumbles past. But as Narath Tan tells his story, the outside world becomes more and more remote, and the trains seem to vanish.

Inevitably, the first thing a visitor to Tan's studio notices is the large slab of intricately carved clay leaning on an easel in the corner of the room. The carving has split apart as the clay has dried; in the center, the body of a beautiful apsara -- a dancer -- is cracked and broken. The cracks are deliberate. "This," Tan explains, "is like my country, from 1975 to 1978."

Tan's country is Cambodia, and when he is asked about the past, he invariably begins his story on April 17, 1975. On that day, an eight-year civil war ended as Khmer Rouge guerillas captured Phnom Penh. Driven by a fanatical Maoist ideology, the Khmer Rouge embarked on a ruthless campaign to create a classless, agrarian society. They began by ordering the evacuation of all cities.

Tan, who was not yet 13 years old, lived with his family on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. His voice is calm as he recalls images from the Khmer Rouge years, weaving a tapestry of sadness and horror: Bloated corpses lining the roads leading out of the city. His father's disappearance. Children, slowly starving, toiling endlessly in the fields, surrounded by rice and fruit which they were forbidden to eat. A group of people, captured while trying to escape to Vietnam, executed with bayonets in front of the other villagers who were forced to chant, "We must kill them!" At times, as Narath recounts the atrocities, he describes them carefully, meticulously. At other times, he is quiet and pensive. Describing the death of his aunt and uncle, victims of disease, he pauses as he relates how he and his cousins dug a grave. Wild dogs, drawn by the smell of the bodies, howled from across the fields. Tan's word's paint pictures that are as vivid as his art: "And the moon just rising ... Very, very sad... Nobody come. Nobody come to see what happened," Tan says. "You die, okay, you die."

A hundred sorrows converge, cracks in the portrait of the apsara.

Robert Buono, an American artist whose studio is in the same building as Tan's, admires the evocative nature of Tan's work. "It brings out a whole different culture," he says. "It's like going to Cambodia and seeing the country." The countries of Southeast Asia are in fact very familiar to Buono. He served in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968, and he recently designed the Veteran's Memorial under construction in Lansing, Illinois. The two sometimes work together, with Buono helping Tan experiment with American materials for use with traditional Cambodian techniques; for example, casting molds in fiberglass rather than clay or concrete. Buono feels that he, too, is learning. "I want to know what he knows," Buono says. "His art is a form of religion. He's got a lot of control."

The control apparent in Tan's work stems from the same self- discipline that enabled Tan to survive the reign of the Khmer Rouge, a reign that was characterized by ceaseless work as well as violence. Tan was assigned different jobs at different times: planting rice, clearing forests, digging canals, building dikes. On one occasion he was among a group of people assigned to move a house to a new worksite. Rather than disassembling the simple bamboo-and-thatch structure so that it could be loaded onto a truck or oxcarts, the cadre ordered the workers to slide poles below the floor, then lift the entire building and carry it to its new location almost 30 miles away. No one dared question the order.

By late 1977, Khmer Rouge raids on Vietnamese villages had led to increasing tension along the countries' border. In 1978, Tan, who had been living in nearby Prey Veng province, was sent away to Pursat, in the west of the country.

Tan offers a succinct description of Pursat.

"Hell on the Earth," he says.

Executions were carried out almost daily In Pursat. Three of Tan's cousins were killed when they complained about the lack of food. One of Tan's brothers, weakened by malnutrition, was executed when he was unable to complete the work he had been assigned. By the end of the year, however, it was clear that the end of Khmer Rouge rule was near. In December, the Vietnamese launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia. They captured Phnom Penh in less than two weeks, and immediately installed a new government; then they began to push into the mountains in the north and west of the country, finally arriving in Tan's village in April.

Tan soon returned to Phnom Penh, and when the School of Fine Arts reopened in early 1980, he enrolled to study sculpture. At first, classes consisted primarily of days spent cleaning the previously abandoned buildings. Inside, students found three skeletal corpses, each with its hands tied behind its back.

Tan enjoyed school once classes began in earnest, and he soon found that he could make extra money by selling his work. Small "monkey heads" -- downsized papier-mache replicas of masks worn by Khmer dancers -- could bring 100 riels, about enough money to buy two small chickens.

Soon, however, Tan began to grow disillusioned with the new government. The communist propaganda preached in the school was uncomfortably reminiscent of Khmer Rouge teachings, and April 17 -- the day of the Khmer Rouge takeover -- was still celebrated as a national holiday.

In 1984, after befriending a man who was active in the resistance against the Vietnamese, Tan was accused of sympathizing with the guerillas, and he was threatened with arrest unless he informed on his friend. Instead, he decided to flee to Thailand. That night, he knelt before his mother and asked for her forgiveness as he told her what he planned to do. Then, with another friend from the art school, he forged a travel pass and made his way to the Thai-Cambodian border. They crossed into Thailand with.in two days and made their way to Nong Samet refugee camp. Nong Samet was controlled by the KPNLF, one of the two noncommunist factions fighting the Phnom Penh government. Tan soon decided, however, that the guerillas were as brutal and corrupt as the government they opposed. Soldiers, he says, constantly robbed and harassed the camp's residents. "After I live there for a few days, I saw it's no good." A short time later, Tan managed to escape to Khao-I-Dang camp, which was administered by the United Nations. At Khao-I-Dang, Tan was interviewed by U.S. Immigration officials, and finally -- in 1988 -- he was granted political asylum in the U.S.

Now, sitting in his studio in Chicago, the past seems impossibly far away. Chicago has become his home; it is here that Tan met his wife, Noi Maliab, another of the estimated 2000 Cambodians living in the city -- and it is here that his son was born. He is well-known in the local Khmer community, and his studio space is provided by the Cambodian Association of Illinois. Tan makes his living in suburban Wood Dale, where he works as an electronics assembler. Most of his co-workers do not know of his artwork.

Most of Tan's works are traditional designs. His "charcoal paintings" are inspired by carvings from Khmer temples. The paintings are made by carving a form in clay. The form is moistened with water, and a sheet of paper is carefully pressed down until the paper follows the contours of the carving. Next, the raised areas of the paper are painted black. In Cambodia, the black coloring was usually derived from soot collected from an oily fire; but Tan now uses paint or ink.

While most of Tan's work will always be done in the traditional styles of Khmer art, he expresses an admiration for Western techniques as well. "The painting, the sculpture... it's very, very beautiful. I think I want to do the art of American style... I want to mix the American and Cambodian."

Some of Tan's work has already been featured in local galleries. In the future he hopes to reach a wider audience with his art. Officials in the local Cambodian community are hoping to arrange for a grant for Tan to teach his skills to younger Cambodians.

Like many refugees, Tan fears that, in the wake of decades of war and strife and dislocation, Khmer culture is in danger of extinction. He hopes that, when his own son is older, he will not neglect his heritage. Perhaps he will study Khmer dance, like the children who often practice across the hall from Tan's studio. Occasionally, when time permits, Tan walks across the hall to watch the children. They have just begun their classes, but if they lack training, their enthusiasm more than compensates. On their slight shoulders, they will carry the burden of the survival of Khmer art. Tan, too, carries the burden, but he never feels it. He has carried many.

-- Chicago, Illinois, 1992

**Group 9**

**Chan Khoun: Cover Story--by Bruce Sharp**

Chan Khoun is looking at her photograph on the cover of TIME Magazine. Nearly 10 years have passed since the picture was taken, and she is looking at the photo for the first time.

The picture shows Chan, age 17, holding her baby sister. The baby's name is Hong, and she is one year old. Her body is matchstick thin, a fragile skeleton covered by loose, wrinkled skin. She lacks the strength to hold up her head. Her eyes are passive, without hope, as if she has known nothing but pain and hunger. The pain is visible in Chan's face as well: her expression speaks sorrow and confusion.

Now, Chan stares at the photo silently, and her face betrays no emotion. The magazine sits in front of her as she answers questions about her life in Cambodia. Her father, sitting on the floor beside her, glances sadly at the photo from time to time. Later, Chan tears the article and the photograph from the magazine, then folds them carefully and puts them away. Hong has been dead since 1979. Cambodia is part of the past.

Today, Chan lives in Providence, Rhode Island, with her husband, Rounh Nhy, and their two infant daughters. Chan's father and brothers and sisters also live in Providence.

It has been fifteen years since the Khmer Rouge communists seized power in Cambodia. They no longer govern the country, but the suffering they inflicted still scars the survivors.

The devastation of Cambodia had its roots in the Vietnam War, when Vietnamese communists began to use Cambodian territory as a base for guerrilla operations. Despite Cambodia's professed neutrality, the U.S. responded by attacking the suspected base areas. As they moved out of their bases, the Vietnamese were drawn into combat with Cambodian government troops. The Vietnamese soon emerged as surrogates for Cambodia's own insurgency. As the fighting escalated, the insurgents -- the Khmer Rouge -- rapidly grew in strength. By the time the besieged government surrendered on April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge had earned a reputation for ruthlessness and brutality. Nonetheless, most people believed that the end of the war would bring better times. They were wrong.

The Battambang province, where Chan's family lived, had. been spared the worst of the fighting. It was not until the war ended that the Khmer Rouge arrived in Chan's village. They went from house to house, asking for soldiers, doctors, and teachers. Those who came forward were taken away without explanation. Several months passed before their fate became known. Most of them were never seen again.

For the first few weeks, the Khmer Rouge made few demands of the people. Then, suddenly, they issued a bewildering order: Families were to be separated. Each person was to be assigned to a different work group, miles apart. Those who protested were given a vague but ominous warning: "If you don't leave, something will happen." Chan's parents were upset, but they knew they had no choice but to comply.

Like most Cambodians, Chan had little understanding of the goals of the Khmer Rouge. Led by Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge sought to create an agrarian communist society where equality and subservience to the state were the supreme values. The uncompromising nature of the revolution became apparent quickly. One of Pol Pot's first acts was to order the complete evacuation of all cities. In many cases, even hospitals were emptied. Witnesses described seeing wounded patients crawling along the highways; other patients, still lying in their beds, were pushed along by distraught relatives. High-ranking officials of the former government were often executed, and in many cases their families -- even infants -- were also killed. Virtually all private property was banned; except for clothing and a handful of personal effects, everything was the property of the State. All markets and currency were abolished. Books and printed materials were forbidden. Travel was allowed only with Khmer Rouge permission. Cambodia was cut off from the outside world.

For Chan, the new society was characterized by monotony and fear. She worked in a group of about 50 young women. They worked every day, beginning at 6 AM. Generally, the work centered on the planting and cultivation of rice. So that valuable work time was not lost in going to and from the fields, thatch and bamboo houses were built near each worksite. Five or six women lived in each house. As they worked, they were constantly guarded by armed soldiers. Despite the rigors of the work, none of the women tried to escape. Orders were followed exactly; it was made very clear that the punishment for disobedience was death.

The harshness of the Khmer Rouge varied widely in different regions. Initially, Chan was relatively lucky. While many of her friends had family members executed by the communists, Chan did not. Rounh Nhy was less fortunate. His father was executed in 1977. According to Rounh, in his region corpses were often left where they would be found by people working in the fields. They served as a very effective warning. In other areas, executions were sometimes performed publicly. Chan's oldest brother, Nhim Khoun, witnessed many such killings, often for minor infractions. Some victims were stabbed and disembowelled. Others were hung. Many others were suffocated: the victim's hands were tied; plastic was then wrapped around the victim's head and tied at the neck. "A few minutes, they die," Nhim says. "Oh, I saw that a lot of times."

In Chan's area, the greatest danger was not execution, but malnutrition. Their diet consisted almost exclusively of rice, and by mid-1976 they began to suffer from food shortages. It was also in 1976 that the Khmer Rouge began to implement a policy of communal eating; from then on, all meals were prepared and eaten together. However, the local cadres did permit foraging for food. In other areas -- including Nhim Khoun's area -- gathering food privately was strictly forbidden. While entire families starved to death, the Khmer Rouge murdered people for the crime of trying to feed themselves.

Despite the risk, Nhim says that he and many others still crept away during the night to search for food. He recalls the desperation that hunger brought: "Rat, rabbit, snake ... people eat everything, believe me," he says. "The people watch the bird. If the bird can eat that thing, the people follow the bird and eat it, too. That's why they survive..."

But, he recalls bitterly, while the rest of the people grew weaker, the Khmer Rouge remained plump and well-fed.

In fact, the cause of the spreading food shortages was not a lack of rice. The problem was that the rice was not distributed to the population. Local administrators were expected to meet quotas set by the central government. In theory, they would provide the necessary food for their people and then send the "surplus" to the central government. The surplus would then be exported, mainly to China, in exchange for weapons. However, the quotas were arbitrary and unrealistic. Many depended on the success of large irrigation projects, projects designed by Khmer Rouge cadres rather than engineers. Few of the projects worked, and few of the quotas were met. Local administrators often simply pretended that the goals had been reached; they then sent the desired rice to the Center and let their people slowly starve.

The lack of food was complicated by the virtual absence of medical care. Like other intellectuals, doctors were widely regarded as enemies of the State. It is estimated that roughly half of the country's doctors died under Pol Pot's reign. With only a handful of exceptions, those who did survive were not permitted to practice medicine; they were instead sent to work in the fields with everyone else. The only medicines Chan saw under the Khmer Rouge were folk remedies made from local plants and animals. Rounh described one such mixture as resembling diarrhea; it was given as an injection. Sick persons were still expected to work. Those who could not had their rations reduced. It did not matter to the Khmer Rouge that lack of food was what had made them sick in the first place. Many people, Nhim recalls, became blind from the lack of vitamins in their diet; many others died from drinking water infested with parasites.

The failure of Khmer Rouge policies was obvious to all those who toiled in the fields day after day. Soon it became obvious to Pol Pot as well, and he began to search for scapegoats. The rate of executions soared, and the Khmer Rouge began to devour itself in a series of bloody purges.

The search for enemies extended beyond Cambodia's borders. Disputes with Vietnam had briefly erupted into heavy fighting by 1977. However, few people outside of the border areas were aware of the conflict. Chan's father, Khoun Bou, remembers 1978 as the year he first heard rumors of a war with Vietnam. The rumors soon proved true: On Christmas Day, 1978, an estimated 90,000 Vietnamese and 18,000 dissident Cambodians launched a full-scale invasion.

The Khmer Rouge were quickly routed. Within two weeks the Vietnamese had captured Phnom Penh. Liberated by the invasion, Cambodians abandoned their collectives en masse. Some returned to their former homes; hundreds of thousands of others fled toward Thailand, and the famine soon worsened. Retreating Khmer Rouge forces often destroyed rice stocks to prevent them from being captured by the Vietnamese. Further, much of the existing harvest may have rotted in the fields in the wake of the sudden migration.

Chan returned to her family's home in mid-1979. The Khmer Rouge still controlled the area, but Chan learned that her brother Nhim had already escaped to Thailand. Now, however, with the Vietnamese closing in, the Khmer Rouge saw that they might benefit from the relief operations mounting along the Thai border. They ordered several families -- including Khoun Bou's -- to accompany them to Thailand. The families would be used as porters, and as cover: the relief agencies would not give food to combatants, so the Khmer Rouge would conceal their weapons just beyond the border and present themselves as innocent refugees. They would then return to mount guerrilla attacks against the Vietnamese.

With only a few articles of clothing and a meager supply of rice, Chan, her two sisters, two brothers, and their father began a long, arduous journey. For Chan's mother, it was too late; she died of illness before they reached Thailand.

For three months they walked constantly, through dense woods and into the mountains separating the two countries. Mines and booby traps previously planted by the Khmer Rouge took a heavy toll on the refugees. The lack of food and fresh water compounded their exhaustion. Chan's infant sister Hong became particularly ill. It was not until refugees began to pour into Thailand that the magnitude of the Cambodian tragedy became widely known. By November 1979, journalists had begun to converge on the border. One of them was Arnaud De Wildenberg, a French photographer working for Gamma/Liason.

According to De Wildenberg, many of the refugees were arriving at a site just south of Aranyaprathet, Thailand, called Ban Taprik. There, the Red Cross picked up the refugees and took them to Sakaeo, where a new refugee camp was being built.

The condition of the people at Ban Taprik was appalling. Many collapsed in the surrounding forest, unable to walk any farther. "The Red Cross had to go in the woods to look for people," De Wildenberg recalls. "They would die in the woods if nobody picked them up. Some were already dead." De Wildenberg himself found two people and carried them back to the Red Cross buses. And, he adds, "Nearly one person in every bus died between Ban Taprik and Sakaeo."

Chan's family was among those taken by bus to Sakaeo. Just after they climbed off the bus, as they knelt down on the ground beside the vehicle, De Wildenberg photographed Chan, cradling her dying sister in one arm. Knowing no French or English, Chan could not speak with the photographer, yet she remembers the moment clearly.

Ten years later, De Wildenberg, too, remembers Sakaeo vividly. Construction of the camp was only beginning as the first buses arrived. "They had just taken away the trees and the brush. It was just a piece of land closed with barbed wire... They were just arriving on a piece of land. Like leaving cattle in the field."

Sakaeo's population, quickly swelled to 35,000, and more than 400 people died there in the first two weeks alone. "I remember the doctors running from one person to another..." De Wildenberg says. "I've never seen so many people dying at the same time."

At Sakaeo, the Khmer Rouge continued to threaten and intimidate the other refugees, often trying to force them to accept "voluntary" repatriation to the Khmer Rouge-controlled areas of Cambodia. The international presence in the camps did at least make it more difficult for the Khmer Rouge to enforce their will, and many refugees refused to return. Khoun Bou was among those who decided that his family would stay.

Conditions at Sakaeo were harsh; but when asked about the camp, Chan's husband offers a simple response. "In Sakaeo," he says, "they had something for you to eat."

Chan and her family spent about a year in Sakaeo. They were then moved to Sakaeo II, and they applied for asylum in the U.S. Nhim Khoun, who had reached Thailand first, had come to the U.S. in 1982, but it was not until 1985 that the rest of the family was allowed to come to America. Nhim had settled in Providence, Rhode Island, and he sponsored the rest of his family when they arrived.

Like all refugees, they faced a difficult period of adjustment in the U.S. The greatest barrier was the language. Chan still has difficulty with English. She worried, too, that they did not know anyone, did not know how to get anywhere, did not know how to find a doctor ...

Arriving in the U.S. in November did nothing to ease the transition. The snow and freezing cold of New England winters are an unwelcome surprise to Asians accustomed to sweltering tropical heat.

Since 1986 Chan has worked at a small jewelry factory in Providence. In 1987 she met and later married Rounh Nhy. Their first child, Sokhoeun, is almost two; their second, Chanath, was born in April, 1990.

It was not until last year that Chan learned her picture had been on the magazine. A cousin in Chicago had been looking through a stack of old news clippings when she recognized Chan's picture. She contacted Chan a short time later.

De Wildenberg's photograph presents a moment of anguish, permanently frozen. Looking at Chan now, it is hard to imagine all that she has witnessed. One remembers words from Stephen Vincent Benet:

They are cured now, very much cured.

They are tanned and fine. Their eyes are their only scars.

<http://www.mekong.net/cambodia/oral_hst.htm>