Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields
Memoirs by Survivors
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Worms from Our Skin
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I was fifteen years old when the Khmer Rouge came to power in April 1975. I can still remember how overwhelmed with joy I was that the war had finally ended. It did not matter who won. I and many Cambodians wanted peace at any price. The civil war had tired us out, and we could not make much sense out of killing our own brothers and sisters for a cause that was not ours. We were ready to support our new government to rebuild our country. We wanted to bring back that slow-paced, simple life we grew up with and loved dearly. At the time we didn't realize how high the price was that we had to pay for the Khmer Rouge's peace.
The Khmer Rouge were very clever and brutal. Their tactics were effective because most of us refused to believe their malicious intentions. Their goal was to liberate us. They risked their own lives and gave up their families for "justice" and "equality." How could these worms have come out of our own skin?

Even after our warmest welcome, the first word from the Khmer Rouge was a lie wrapped around a deep anger and hatred of the kind of society they felt Cambodia was becoming. They told us that Americans were going to bomb the cities. They forced millions of residents of Phnom Penh and other cities out of their homes. They separated us from our friends and neighbors to keep us off balance, to prevent us from forming any alliance to stand up and win back our rights. They ripped off our homes and our possessions. They did this intentionally, without mercy.

They were willing to pay any cost, any lost lives for their mission. Innocent children, old women, and sick patients from hospital beds were included. Along the way, many innocent Cambodians were dying of starvation, disease, loss of loved ones, confusion, and execution.
We were seduced into returning to our hometowns in the villages so they could reveal our true identities. Then the genocide began. First, it was the men.

They took my father. They told my family that my father needed to be reeducated. Brainwashed. But my father's fate is unknown to this day. We can only imagine what happened to him. This is true for almost all Cambodian widows and orphans. We live in fear of finding out what atrocities were committed against our fathers, husbands, brothers. What could they have done that deserved a tortured death?

Later the Khmer Rouge killed the wives and children of the executed men in order to avoid revenge. They encouraged children to find fault with their own parents and spy on them. They openly showed their intention to destroy the family structure that once held love, faith, comfort, happiness, and companionship. They took young children from their homes to live in a commune so that they could indoctrinate them.

Parents lost their children. Families were separated. We were not allowed to cry or show any grief when they took away our loved ones. A man would be killed if he lost an ox he was assigned to tend. A woman would be killed if she was too tired to work. Human life wasn't even worth a bullet. They clubbed the back of our necks and pushed us down to smother us and let us die in a deep hole with hundreds of other bodies.

They told us we were VOID. We were less than a grain of rice in a large pile. The Khmer Rouge said that the Communist revolution could be successful with only two people. Our lives had no significance to their great Communist nation, and they told us, "To keep you is no benefit, to destroy you is no loss."

They accomplished all of this by promoting and encouraging the "old" people, who were the villagers, the farmers, and the uneducated. They were the most violent and ignorant people, and the Khmer Rouge taught them to lead, manage, control, and destroy. These people took orders without question. The Khmer Rouge built animosity and jealousy into them so the killings could be justified. They ordered us to attend meetings every night where we took turns finding fault with each other, intimidating those around us. We survived by becoming like them. We stole, we cheated, we lied, we hated ourselves and each other, and we trusted no one.

The people on the Khmer Rouge death list were the group called the city people. They were the "new" people. These were any Cambodian men, women, girls, boys, and babies who did not live in their "liberated zones" before they won the war in 1975. Their crime was that they lived in the enemy's zone, helping and supporting the enemy.

The city people were the enemy, and the list was long. Former soldiers, the police, the CIA, and the KGB. Their crime was fighting in the civil war. The merchants, the capitalists, and the businessmen. Their crime was exploiting the poor. The rich farmers and the landlords. Their crime was exploiting the peasants. The intellectuals, the doctors, the lawyers, the monks, the teachers, and the civil servants. These people thought, and their memories were tainted by the evil Westerners. Students were getting education to exploit the poor. Former celebrities, the poets. These people carried bad memories of the old, corrupted Cambodia.

The list goes on and on. The rebellious, the kind-hearted, the brave, the clever, the individualists, the people who wore glasses, the literate, the popular, the complainers, the lazy, those with talent, those with trouble getting along with others, and those with soft hands. These people were corrupted and lived off the blood and sweat of the farmers and the poor.

Very few of us escaped these categories. My family were not villagers. We were from Phnom Penh. I was afraid of who I was. I was an educated girl from a middle-class family. I could read, write, and think. I was proud of my family and my roots. I was scared that they would hear my thoughts and prayers, that they could see my dreams and feel my anger and disapproval of their regime. I was always hungry. I woke up hungry before sunrise and walked many kilometers to the worksite with no breakfast. I worked until noon. My lunch was either rice porridge with a few grains or boiled young bananas or boiled corn. I continued working till sunset. My dinner was the same as lunch. I couldn't protest to Angka, but my stomach protested to me that it needed more food. Every night I went to sleep dirty and hungry. I was sad because I missed my mom. I was fearful that this might be the night I'd be taken away, tortured, raped, and killed.

I wanted to commit suicide but I couldn't. If I did, I would be labeled "the enemy" because I dared to show my unhappiness with their regime. My death would be followed by my family's death because they were the family of the enemy. My greatest fear was not my death, but how much suffering I had to go through before they killed me.

They kept moving us around, from the fields into the woods. They purposely did this to disorient us so they could have complete control. They did it to get rid of the "useless people." Those who were too old or too weak to work. Those who did not produce their quota. We were cold because we had so few clothes and blankets. We had no shoes. We were sick and had little or no medical care. They told us that we "volunteered" to work fifteen hours or more a day in the rain or in the moonlight with no holidays. We were timid and lost. We had to be silent. We not only lost our identities, but we lost our pride, our senses, our religion, our loved ones, our souls, ourselves.

The Khmer Rouge said they were creating a utopian nation where everyone would be equal. They restarted our nation by resettling everyone and changing everything back to zero. The whole nation was equally poor. But while the entire population was dying of starvation, disease, and hopelessness, the Khmer Rouge was

creating a new upper class. Their soldiers and the Communist party members were able to choose any woman or man they wanted to marry. In addition to boundless food, they were crazed with gold, jewelry, perfume, imported watches, Western medicine, cars, motorcycles, bicycles, silk, and other imported goods.

My dear friend Sakon was married to a handicapped Khmer Rouge veteran against her will. He was mentally disturbed and also suffered from tetanus. At night he woke up from his sleep with nightmares of his crimes and his killings. After that, he beat her. One night, he stabbed my friend to death and injured her mother.

Near my hut there was a woman named Chamroeun. She watched her three children die of starvation, one at a time. She would have been able to save their lives had she had gold or silk or perfume to trade for food and medicine on the black market. The Khmer Rouge veterans and village leaders had control of the black market. They traded rice that Chamroeun toiled over for fancy possessions. The Khmer Rouge gave a new meaning to corruption.

The female soldiers were jealous of my lighter skin and feminine figure. While they were enjoying their nice black pajamas, silk scarves, jewelry, new shoes, and perfume, they stared at me, seeing if I had anything better than they did. I tried to appear timid with my ragged clothes, but it was hard to hide the pride in my eyes. In January 1979 I was called to join a district meeting. The district leader told us that it was time to get rid of "all the wheat that grows among the rice plants." The city people were the wheat. The city people were to be eliminated. My life was saved because the Vietnamese invasion came just two weeks later.

When the Vietnamese invasion happened, I cried. I was crying with joy that my life was saved. I was crying with sorrow that my country was once again invaded by our century-old enemy. I stood on Cambodian soil feeling that I no longer belonged to it. I wanted freedom. I decided to escape to the free world.

I traveled with my family from the heart of the country to the border of Thailand. It was devastating to witness the destruction of my homeland that had occurred in only four years. Buddhist temples were turned into prisons. Statues of Buddha and artwork were vandalized. Schools were turned into Khmer Rouge headquarters where people were interrogated, tortured, killed, and buried. School yards were turned into killing fields. Old marketplaces were empty. Books were burned. Factories were left to rust. Plantations were without tending and bore no fruit.

This destruction was tolerable compared to the human conditions. Each highway was filled with refugees. We were refugees of our own country. With our skinny bodies, bloated stomachs, and hollow eyes, we carried our few possessions and looked for our separated family members. We asked who lived and didn't want to mention who died. We gathered to share our horrifying stories. Stories about people being pushed into deep wells and ponds and suffocating to death. People were baked alive in a local tile oven. One woman was forced to cook her husband's liver, which was cut out while he was still alive. Women were raped before execution. One old man said, "It takes a river of ink to write our stories."

In April 1979, the Buddhist New Year, exactly four years after the Khmer Rouge came to power, I joined a group of corpselike bodies dancing freely to the sound of clapping and songs of folk music that defined who we were. We danced under the moonlight around the bonfire. We were celebrating the miracles that saved our lives. At that moment, I felt that my spirit and my soul had returned to my weak body. Once again, I was human.

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