Introduction

This is a book of seven stories. Each is its own story, but also a story with a common thread: stay alive, escape, begin again. In this book, that story is told by seven Cambodians who lived through genocide, embarked on the difficult journey to safety, endured life in a refugee camp and then began again in a foreign, cold, and complicated place.

The Cambodian genocide was a tragedy that from 1975 to 1979 took the lives of an estimated 1.7 million civilians.[1] While many died of disease and starvation, a great many others were tortured to death. At profound personal risk, some Cambodians made an impossible choice: to travel, mostly on foot, the mountainous and mine-riddled distances from Cambodia to neighboring Thailand. They brought along their children and elders and little else. They lived in camps along the Cambodia/Thai border for interminable years, waiting for whatever comes next. Then, the chance to go is offered–and taken. A life in America begins.

Fundamentally, this book is a first-person oral history. It foregrounds a peoples' survival of famine, disease, executions, and strict authoritarian rule to pursue a path toward an unknown possible future in a new place. It is likewise a picture book, or visual ethnography. Each narrative is accompanied by photographs of objects, often photographs themselves, kept throughout the long journey. Included are family photos, hidden at great personal risk, official identity portraits, medical reports, and letters of reference. Each object has its own story, and together they contribute to the story told by the person who owns them, making that story more detailed and more tangible to the reader.

The Journey

On the journey to Thailand food was extremely scarce. People survived by eating what bits they could bring and anything that could be found: leaves, small crabs and fish from the rice fields, wild animals from the forest. Along the way, land mines and booby traps were a constant danger, as were poisonous snakes and predatory insects. Khmer Rouge snipers, Vietnamese

soldiers, and groups of bandits often lay in hiding or approached suddenly. Traveling toward the border could only be done at night, furtively and with utmost care.

Refugees fortunate enough to survive the journey eventually arrived at the Thai border camps, exhausted, sick, and starving. New arrivals were furnished with the barest minimum: a tarp to make a tent, a few clothes, a bowl of rice, basic medical care. Thieves and thugs were rampant. Young girls sometimes hid in the forest to sleep more safely at night.

After years of uncertainty in the border camps, survivors faced the hurdle of resettlement. A convoluted sequence of arrangements had to be made. Where will we live? What work can we do? Will the children go to school? Can we learn the language?

Suspicion, racism, isolation, and poverty greeted these refugees. As mostly rural people of agrarian origins, they struggled to cope with a vastly different life in American cities. Elderly refugees found such challenges especially formidable. Places like Long Beach, California; Seattle, Washington; Lowell, Massachusetts; and Providence, Rhode Island, gradually accumulated the largest Cambodian communities, as families clustered together and found comfort in their common struggle and shared culture. Better jobs requiring good English skills were accessible to the few. Many found jobs in factories, working long hours on assembly lines. Children in school often experienced a substantial disadvantage, as their parents could not help them with their homework or communicate with their teachers. Seemingly insurmountable obstacles like buying groceries or finding a doctor had to be overcome. Becoming a citizen or buying a home were dreams that often took a lifetime to achieve. Churches and NGOs stepped in to help, becoming a critical lifeline for the new arrivals.

The Stories

The storytellers share experiences that include unimaginable hardships, terrible physical and psychological deprivations, and, most fundamentally, the looming fear that one simply might not survive the day. Participants who were very young during this time remember the events with little understanding of external causes, but with the immediate and sensory memories of children.

Each narrative is delivered in the chronological order of events as they were experienced, beginning with life before the Khmer Rouge, life during the genocide, life in the refugee camps, and the subsequent resettlement in the United States.

During our interviews, participants recalled events occurring many years past, sometimes nearly forgotten. As listeners, we could sense the sifting

through of memories that came to mind precisely at that instant in the narrative, often sparking much emotion and deeper discussions. The setting was usually the kitchen table or living room of the storyteller, with various family members as the audience, sometimes including children, listening to their parent's personal history with rapt attention, often for the first time.

An Incomplete History

In order to understand the circumstances under which these events took place, a brief historical review may be helpful. On 9 November 1953 King Norodom Sihanouk proudly declared Cambodia's independence as a sovereign state, no longer a colony of France. For the next twelve years, Cambodia evolved as a prosperous and progressive country. Expansive and cosmopolitan, its capital, Phnom Penh, was known as the "Paris of Southeast Asia." Cambodia's rich natural resources, strategic location, and thriving urban population eager to embrace Western notions of modernity were celebrated by the global politic as the Southeast Asian example of a model state.

But in 1965 the American bombings began. As the Vietnam War escalated, the United States, under President Lyndon Johnson, began a bombing campaign of Vietnam, which rapidly spilled over into eastern Cambodia, a neutral country. In 1969 the bombings greatly escalated under President Richard Nixon who, on the advice of his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, authorized the release of over 2.7 million tons of ordnance upon the Cambodian countryside, rivaling the total number dropped by the Allies on Europe, Japan, and North Africa during all of World War II. The large and infamous B-52 bombers were employed to drop heavy ordnance, causing massive destruction to rural geographies and leaving gigantic craters in their wake. Smaller, faster and more agile F-16 aircraft, releasing village-shredding cluster bombs, targeted populated regions on a relentless and regular basis.[2]

In a determined effort to decimate North Vietnamese supply lines, the American bombers spread across a vast swath of Cambodia, covering well over half the country and obliterating anything remotely indicative of life. A huge, desperate wave of people migrated west to escape the devastation. Hundreds of thousands of displaced people clustered around the capital, Phnom Penh. Spanning eight long years, it is estimated that the American air campaign was responsible for the deaths of over 275,000 Cambodian civilians.[3]

The decimation ended in August of 1973. The Khmer Rouge emerged out of the jungle, radicalized to the extreme, in large part by the cataclysmic American bombings. Determined to crush Western imperialism and those under its influence, Khmer Rouge troops–many of them child sol-

diers, marched into Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975. And so began the most tragic era of Cambodian history, the Khmer Rouge Genocide (1975–1979).

Within three days of their seizure of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge furiously evacuated its two million inhabitants. Residents of all Cambodian cities were warned that more American bombings would soon target villages and urban centers–a convenient lie that was effective, because it was a reminder of the terrible shelling that had already taken place. Told that the evacuation to safety would be temporary, evacuees were forced to walk on foot for miles, deep into the countryside. During the chaotic exodus, Buddhist monks, male heads of families, and anyone perceived as Westernized or belonging to the old regime, were brutally murdered. For those who survived the journey, agrarian work camps were hastily constructed. "Angkar," the secretive Khmer Rouge leadership assembled by Paris-educated Cambodian Communist Pol Pot, declared it "The Year Zero," a new beginning, with no future and no past. Cambodia's borders were shut, its entire population imprisoned within.

Throughout the nation, all nonrevolutionary cultural behaviors and expressions were rigorously forbidden. Families were forcefully separated. Traditional marriage was banned. Reading, writing, singing, dancing, smiling, speaking a foreign language, listening to Western media, keeping personal possessions, and traveling without permission were outlawed. Buddhist temples, schools, hospitals, libraries, stores, markets, and former government offices were abandoned. Life for most Cambodians became one of endless toil and unspeakable suffering. Across the country, thousands of mass graves were dug to conceal the victims who had been killed or who had perished from disease and starvation. To this day, thousands of mass graves remain and only a few of the perpetrators responsible for the "Killing Fields" have been brought to justice.

The reign of the Khmer Rouge was the living reality of all contributors to this book. What follows are their stories of perseverance, resilience and survival.

Notes

1. The number of Cambodians killed during the Khmer Rouge regime of 1975 to 1979 varies among sources, but most estimates range from 1.5 to 2 million people.
2. The estimated tonnage of ordnance dropped on Cambodia during the US military bombing campaign from 1965 to 1973 is 2.7 million tons. Importantly, various sources provide slightly different figures due to variations in methodology and data.
3. The estimate of between 100,000 and 500,000 Cambodian civilian deaths resulting from American bombings during the period from 1965 to 1973 has been cited in various academic works, reports, and books.

Figure 0.1. Khmer Rouge wedding between Nun Huy (left) and Prok Khoeun (right) at S-24 Prison, circa 1976, taken by Nhim Kim Sreang, head of the S-21 Prison Photography Unit. In Democratic Kampuchea, large group weddings were common and mandatory. Often the bride and groom did not know each other but were chosen by Angkar ("The Organization"). Photo courtesy of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.