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# Chapter One

## ON THE HEELS OF CIVIL WAR



### **The Killing Fields**

No places to hide,  
no skies under which to rest;  
and the moaning of children  
and the cries of mothers  
out of blazing fire across the land.<sup>1</sup>

—From *Only Mothers Will Embrace Sorrows* by U Sam Oeur,  
poet and army captain in the American-backed  
Cambodian government of Gen. Lon Nol

All wars are civil wars,  
because all men are brothers.

—Francois Fenelon

**I**T'S A common question in college ethics classes: If you were hungry enough, would you feel justified in stealing a loaf of bread? Perhaps you've engaged in a lively theoretical discussion about this. But it's difficult to have an honest debate when your stomach has never really known hunger, when you have never been desperate enough to consider theft as your only means of survival.

My sister Boran did not live long enough to debate with anyone on the subject. Like me, she was born in Cambodia at a time when hunger was anything but theoretical. But Boran was never imprisoned like I was, unless you consider that our entire nation was locked in the prison-state of Pol Pot's extreme Communist ideology and his murderous web of leadership.

You may have heard of the Killing Fields. You may even know it is a five-year epoch that fits somewhere in the complex history of the Vietnam War. Although there are specific places in the Cambodian countryside where the bones of our people still emerge from the ground after a heavy rain, the phrase aptly describes our entire nation from 1975 until 1979.

Early in those years Boran was assigned work in a communal garden in her village. All Cambodians were given subsistence jobs in what Pol Pot called "the great leap forward." But the harder we worked, the less we moved forward. By the time the harvest came in Boran's village, she was weak and hungry enough to steal. She kept

back a few of the scrawniest sweet potatoes for herself.

The field was guarded by young boys called *chhlops*, or spies. One saw Boran slip a potato in her pocket and alerted a *cadre*. This thirteen-year-old officer beat her to death with her own shovel—not even bothering to remove the sweet potatoes from her pocket.

I did not hear of Boran's death until several years later. She died alone, isolated by the madness of a genocidal, paranoid regime, and was hastily buried. Between 1975 and 1979, nearly one-fourth of our population died. Like my own father and a host of my friends, many starved to death or died of disease. Even more were executed for crimes as slight as continuing to wear eyeglasses—which signified elitism in the minds of our leaders—or stealing barely enough food to live for one more day.

Beginning with the time of the Killing Fields and ending in 1989 when Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia, I was guilty of a crime—one that was ultimately punishable by death. I was a follower of Christ. Not only that, I was a leader in the church, both before Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge deemed all religions subversive and after the nationwide paralysis of the Killing Fields when the church, to survive, grew underground.

As you'll read, there were many times when the only thing that separated me from a martyr's fate was a miracle. Miracles that, in light of a mounting tally of Christian martyrdom, were hard to understand.

When I heard about Boran, I wondered why God allowed me to live. Now, that's a question for the ethics classes. Why did I survive when so many I loved did not? I don't have a tidy answer. But I am sure of one reason: so I could tell you my story.

### **The Nightmare Emerges**

I remember the first time I heard the term *the Killing Fields*.

I'm not sure when the rest of the world heard it. Perhaps it was not long after 1979 when Ho Van Tay, a Vietnamese combat photographer, followed the stench of rotting human remains to the gates of Tuol Sleng<sup>2</sup> prison and documented his discovery to the world. In a moment reminiscent of the liberation of Dachau in Germany or Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland at the end of World War II, I can only imagine Tay's horror as the truth assaulted his senses and he realized what he'd stumbled upon.

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If you are *there* for a genocide,  
it is your nightmare.  
Your memory.  
Something you can never forget.

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I'm not sure when the Western world became aware that the Killing Fields had been the grim reality of our nation. Or when memorials began to rise upon the very ground where tourists felt the crunch of human bones beneath their feet and peered at photographs of prisoners—men, boys, pregnant women, babies, girls—some posing as if sitting for a solemn portrait and others with the frightened eyes of the doomed.

I am not sure when the records of those prisoners emerged with their short biographies that began with their occupations, mostly farmers, and ended with a cryptic “smashed”<sup>3</sup> to indicate the efficient way the Khmer Rouge disposed of its enemies—its own people—and in the process spared their bullets for the Viet Cong. I don't know when our own tragedy became known to the world, only to be forgotten when the next genocide hit the newsstands.

That's what genocide is—something everyone would rather forget. Something so irredeemable we cannot consider it too long for fear the grief of its existence anywhere in the world will swallow us whole. A nightmare.

But if you are *there* for a genocide, it is your nightmare. Your memory. Something you can never forget.

When I first heard the words *the Killing Fields*, I was close enough for the woman who said them to point and add, “Over there.” I was 26 years old. It was the end of 1978 and the killing of my own people by the Khmer Rouge, also my own people, had escalated until at least one in five

of our population lay dead.<sup>4</sup> Our stories are alike in that they are solitary and they are senseless. And none of us saw it coming.

### **Idealism and What I Did with Mine**

A civil war was brewing in my homeland when I came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Like many young men who grow up during a time of dramatic polarities, I was an idealist. And because I was young, I was also impressionable.

At first the two lines behind which men fought for power in Cambodia were not drawn very boldly. Some were loyal to our exiled Prince Sihanouk and, by default, to the burgeoning Communist Party. What eventually became the Khmer Rouge began as a collection of groups—some more like cults—that embraced varying Communist ideologies. Eventually under Pol Pot, most of these groups melded into one.

Then there were those who supported Lon Nol, the American-backed general who had overthrown Sihanouk in 1970. Sihanouk had peacefully negotiated our independence from France in 1953, and he was widely considered a brilliant diplomat. Under his rule, Cambodia remained neutral while war raged in our neighboring countries. But many felt he was too sympathetic to the North Vietnamese, which rendered him dangerous to the United States and vulnerable to a coup by his own general, Lon Nol.



Most of my family was loyal to the reigning regime, to Lon Nol's Republicans who were fighting the Communists. By the time I was 20, I had joined the Maquis, one of the more benign—so I thought—Communist factions. But I was naïve. I thought the nationalist sentiments embraced by the Maquis would steer our country in the right direction. I was disenchanted with the French colonialism of our past and with the American-backed government of Lon Nol. I supported the return of Prince Sihanouk, in exile in Beijing, who had responded to Lon Nol's coup by aligning himself with Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. Wanting to bring about change, I joined the Maquis, or, as it is translated from the French, "The Jungle."

Genocide often begins with the pretext of "the greater good" and ends with any horrific means to achieve it. To perpetrate the myth, the reigning power uses children, teenagers, or very young adults. I wonder if those pliable young men who looted Jewish businesses for the Nazi regime on the infamous Kristallnacht in Germany—"the night of broken glass"—began like I did. Were they enamored with a noble idea? Did they really believe the propaganda that hoodwinked so many?

I see pictures of skinny boy soldiers shouldering AK-47s in Rwanda or Sierra Leone and cannot imagine how an idea can germinate in a young mind and grow to such dreadful proportions. Are these young boys victims, crimi-

nals, or simply mistaken? Did they pick up a rock, a stick, or an automatic weapon because, somehow, that made sense in the grand scheme of their leader's politics?

Later, during the years of the Killing Fields in Cambodia, young boys were used as *chhlops*, spies. By the time a boy reached 13, he was promoted. He became a soldier.

I was not a Communist long enough to be forced to become a soldier. Even so, most who remained loyal to the ideals I embraced while I was in the Maquis watched in horror as our ideals were twisted into a rationale for mass murder.

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My Communist mentor told me  
any sacrifice I made would  
contribute to the greater good:  
to loving, rebuilding,  
and protecting Cambodia.

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I joined this particular group of Communist activists because I was a patriot who believed in peace. I don't know if, had I remained in the Maquis, I would have succumbed to the "kill or be killed" pressure that trapped many of the *cadres* (officers) in the makeshift prisons that pocked the Cambodian countryside. The killings occurred in growing

numbers from 1975, when Pol Pot and the Democratic Kampuchea (Kampuchea is the original name for Cambodia) seized Phnom Penh from Lon Nol, until 1979, when the Vietnamese army invaded and forced him to retreat.

Toward the end, a frenzy of paranoia reigned, and it really didn't matter where your loyalties lay. You could be executed—either swiftly with a blow to the back of the head with a hoe or a metal pipe or slowly by daily beatings and torture—for offenses as insignificant as using a foreign word, showing affection to your wife, or even having more than one syllable in your name. Idealism had become insanity.

While the civil war festered, before it became the open wound of the Killing Fields, my idealism never led me to do the unthinkable, to take human life. But because of that idealism, I did some pretty inane things. The Communists taught us to relinquish all things personal in favor of the communal. I believed that I as an individual was insignificant in light of the collective society.

My Communist mentor, Mr. At Veth, who was my yoga instructor and literature teacher, told me any sacrifice I made would contribute to the greater good: to loving, rebuilding, and protecting Cambodia. And so, because of an ideal, I chopped a syllable off my name. My parents named me Sovann, which means gold; I changed it to Vann.

You may think the meaning of my name was the reason I felt I had to change it. The wealthy were, as they were to all Communist sects in Asia, suspect. Ownership—of anything—was considered a liability. Eventually gold itself became worthless. And those who possessed it were held in savage contempt.

But it wasn't what my name implied that led me to change it; it was how it *sounded*. Changing my name represented a small leap from an idea to an action. Back then, it made perfect sense. In the new Cambodia no one should have more syllables in their name than anyone else. To leave the old life behind and create a new unified world order, wouldn't it be simpler to all have one-syllable names?

So I did to my name what the Khmer Rouge eventually did to all of us: I diminished it. My name, like everything and everyone around me, became so small, it almost disappeared. My new name symbolized what would happen to Phnom Penh's population in the next few years: it would be cut in half.

I was a small young man, barely an adult, with a small name and, I soon realized, a small vision. What I failed to see was that the Khmer Rouge would soon drive all of Cambodia out of our cities and into the jungle. The Maquis would become our home for almost five years.

## The Safe and the Unsafe

On April 17, 1975, Pol Pot seized Phnom Penh. I along with one million others fled the city. The civil war was over and the revolution had won. The pretense for this evacuation, repeated over and over on loudspeakers mounted on Khmer Rouge Jeeps that swarmed through the city, was that American bombers were on the way, and we all believed it. But the bombers never came, and the bombs never fell.

If the Americans were doing anything, it was exactly what we were doing: leaving. Under Lon Nol, foreign soldiers, diplomats, and journalists had been welcome, or at least tolerated, in Phnom Penh. The night before the siege, the Westerners living in the capital received word that the invasion would happen the next day.

While we were shuffled out of the city to shouted commands underscored with automatic weapon fire, helicopters landed at the US Embassy. Two hundred and seventy-six people left the country on CH-53 helicopters that had flown to Cambodia from two American aircraft carriers. Although several Khmer rockets landed on neighboring buildings, “Operation Eagle Pull” was considered a flawless rescue.<sup>5</sup>

The civil war was indeed over. But the killing wasn’t, not by a long shot. Four days later, on April 21, 1975, *Time* magazine reported, in a bizarre ironic twist, “Although there is no such thing as a graceful ending to five years

of fratricidal bloodshed, it may still be possible to make the inevitable transfer of power in Phnom Penh without subjecting its civilians to the ultimate tragedy of an all-out military assault.”<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, we citizens of Phnom Penh made a bewildered exit on foot as quickly as we could. Pol Pot considered April 17 day one of his “Year Zero,” a literal voiding of Cambodia, a total deconstruction the Khmer Rouge felt was necessary to reconstruct the nation into an agrarian, Communist society.

All we were told was that we would be gone for three days, but half of us never returned. The other half spent the next four years in the jungle, either in one of many hastily constructed prisons or subsisting as forced laborers in the rice fields. We were driven into the countryside and stripped of everything we owned: currency, education, property. The lost syllables of our names were nothing compared to the other losses: our culture, our identity, our homes, our ancient religions.

Soon I and thousands of my countrymen living with me in the jungle realized we were trapped. There were no choppers on the way to save us. We were alone. All but forgotten. Along with starvation and slaughter, suicides became commonplace. We were caught in a desperate place with no hope for rescue. As one of us later wrote, “Now that the revolution had come, we had been bulldozed by it, reduced to the same level as the other exiles around

us. And there was no society building. Just the rubble of the old one.”<sup>7</sup>

With the sudden ferocity of a thunderstorm, fratricide turned into genocide.

## Notes

1. U Sam Oeur, *Sacred Vows* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1998), 35.
2. Tuol Sleng was a high school that the Khmer Rouge converted into a prison. It was notorious for torture of political prisoners. The commandant, Duch, faced the International Court in Cambodia in 2007.
3. The term “smashed” was used repeatedly—in parentheses next to a name—to describe executions in the prison records at Tuol Sleng.
4. Estimates range from 1.7 to 2 million dead during the Killing Fields.
5. “Cambodia: American Pullout from a City Under Siege,” *Time*, April 21, 1975. [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,917322-1,00.html#ixzz11QeAlq8N](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,917322-1,00.html#ixzz11QeAlq8N).
6. *Ibid.*
7. Haing Ngor with Roger Warner. *Survival in the Killing Fields* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1987), 119.