

# **Khmer Genocide Survivor Can't Get on With His Life**

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"I risked my life to get here, and I have done nothing with my time in America." Says taxi driver, Matt Sindvith. "I have seen women who were raped, or people who survived the war in Bosnia or Sarajevo. They were able to put that behind them. But I cannot. And, until I do, I can't get on with my life."

The generation of Khmers, aged twenty-five and over, share a history of survival, loss, and suffering. But for many, the trauma was never dealt with. And the scars of a war, which ended more than two decades ago, are still open wounds, which prevent them from advancing.

Stuck in traffic on the Washington Beltway, I can only see the back of the driver's head, but the man in the photo on the license, dangling from the sun visor, looks like a Khmer.

"Sua Sedai," I begin, going out on a limb.  
"Da nyat junjet Khmer dey?"

Slowly, he answers me, and we begin a rudimentary conversation. "I'm sorry." He says, switching to heavily accented English. "I have nearly lost my language. His tone of voice conveys his embarrassment.

By the time we reach my home, Matt has given me a brief summary of the events of his life. Not only had Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge driven him from Cambodia, robbing him of his language, culture, and way of life, but they had also murdered both his mother and father.

"My dream, before I die," Says Matt, "Is to find my sister.

The last time Matt saw his younger sister, Sok Pola, was in 1980, when he escaped to a refugee camp in Thailand.

"A few years ago, I heard she was still a live." He told me. "A Khmer friend in America said that he had seen my sister working in a garment factory in either Sihanoukville or Koh Kong. I was told she is married..." Matt trailed off. He radiated a sadness that was of an intensity I had never seen before. Thinking about his baby sister obviously filled him with deep emotions, loss, anger, and loneliness. In anyone else, tears might

have come. But after getting to know Matt better, I would discover that if he had moved beyond the stage of grief. Years of privation and hardship had drained him of his tears.

What are the odds, that some strange Karmic force would bring together a Khmer speaking journalist, just returned from Phnom Penh, and a Cambodian holocaust survivor, in need of a friend?

Not quite believing that I was interested in helping him, Matt wrote out the names of his parents and siblings.

"I don't know how to write them in English." He told me.

"It's OK," I encouraged him. "Just write it in Khmer."

He paused again. "I almost don't remember how." He said. "Can you imagine not remembering how to write the names of your family members?"

Matt and I agreed to meet a few days later, and over a bowl of Burmese soup, the closest thing to Khmer food we could find in the District, he told me his story.

"I don't trust people." He began. "And I don't like to talk about those things." He meant the Pol Pot time.

It was obviously difficult for Matt to talk. Like so many Khmers, he has been walking around with the horrific story of his life bottled up inside of him. Under the best of circumstances, Khmer culture teaches that you are never supposed to talk about a problem. With reference to the Khmer Rouge regime, this policy becomes even more extreme. Having a selective memory and an absolute refusal to dredge up the past is the only way that victims and perpetrators are able to live side-by-side in modern Cambodia, without revenge killings happening every day.

Many people compare the Cambodian auto-genocide to the Holocaust of Jews, under the Nazis. And, while there are many similarities, there are two fundamental differences, which make it even harder for Khmers to let the past go. First of all, twenty percent of the Khmer population was murdered, not by an outside force, but by other Khmers. Second of all, not a single Khmer was excluded from participation in the genocide. Every single Khmer, living in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, was a victim, a perpetrator, or both.

Matt's father was a military officer, under the French and under Prime Minister Prince Sihanouk. After he retired, he served as a high ranking police official in the Lon Nol government.

"He received two pensions." said Matt proudly. "One from France and one from Cambodia."

In 1975, when the city fell to the Khmer Rouge, Matt's family was living in Tutapong, Phnom Penh. According to Matt, when the Khmer Rouge soldiers marched in, they gave everyone just twenty-four hours to evacuate the city.

"We didn't want to leave." He said, "But they kicked us out."

As an observer to the aftermath of the Cambodian civil war, the question I always ask is "Why didn't you escape to America in 1975?"

"In 1975 people didn't talk about escape. They were just happy the shooting had stopped. Also, we didn't want to leave Cambodia." Said Matt, echoing the sentiments of most Khmers. Of all of the peoples I have met in my years of living abroad, I have never seen a people so completely bound to their homeland.

"Even in 1979, when the war was over, I didn't think of leaving the country. If I had wanted to leave I would have left in 1975. My family had money and connections. They tried to send me with American evacuation. But I wouldn't go."

Matt's older brother and sister, who were already married, went off with their families.

"By chance, my whole family met up at a temple a few days later. It was the last time I saw most of them."

Matt's mother had wanted to go west, but his father wanted to go back to his homeland, of Kompong Cham.

"This was a mistake." Said Matt. "Too many people knew my father there. And because he was a former soldier and a police officer, he was singled out."

His father was taken away, and Matt never saw him again.

Soon afterwards, the Khmer Rouge separated the children from the adults.

"I only saw my mother once more, in 1977."

The Khmer Rouge favored the country people, who they called Khmer Ja, or old people. Conversely, they hated the city people, who they called Khmer Tmai, or new people.

"We tried to hide the fact that we were from the city." Said Matt. "But everything we did, we gave ourselves away. Even the way I talked, they knew I was a city boy."

"When they took my mother in 1977, my sister wanted to go with her. But I told her not to, or she would die also."

I asked Matt just how well the average Khmer understood the situation, while it was happening.

"At the time I didn't understand anything I only wanted to survive. The average person at the time didn't have a global understanding of what was happening. And we had no idea how bad the future would be. I had never considered running away to America. In fact, before 1979, I had barely even heard of America."

The entire population of Cambodia was organized into work groups, and toiled at forced labor, constantly in fear of execution.

"It was like Auschwitz. We woke up at 6:00, no breakfast, and walked an hour to where we had to work. We worked till lunch, and walked back. Lunch was a little bit of watery porridge. To supplement our diet, we ate anything we could find; water grass, stewed or steamed with salt. We ate too many strange things; grasshoppers, rats, lizards..."

"My sister got more food, because she was a girl and younger. She tried to give it to me. But I wanted her to have it.

After we ate, we walked back, and worked until 6 or 7. We ate dinner, another small bowl of porridge, and then we had a criticism meeting. After that, we slept."

"At the meetings, I was always singled out and beaten, because I was a city boy, and I could read, and speak French. A village boy used objects to beat me, but I didn't resist. It is good I didn't resist, because I would have been killed."

"I don't know how anyone could survive. American kids in general would die."

"When you were sick, you would tell them, but there was no medicine. Don't be a lazy bastard, they would say, get back to work. Your illnesses were never treated."

"Pol Pot was not well-known at that time. When I was in the city, we never knew that name. We knew the name Ieng Saray, but not Pol Pot. He was like a godfather, the man behind the scenes."

"The name we heard every day was Angka (organization). When they wanted you to do something, they always said, Angka wants you to do this or that. And if you didn't do it, you were betraying the party, Angka, not the individual."

"Angka was a faceless organization, who issued all the laws and edicts. Who were they referring to? It could be some idiot over there who made up his own rules."

In the final year of the regime, Angka began feeding on itself. Paranoia in higher echelons caused major purges, resulting in the execution of thousands of Khmer Rouge cadre.

"Hun Sen ran to Vietnam to avoid being killed." Said Matt, referring to the current Prime Minister. "Hun Sen pretended to be the savior of Cambodia. He led the Vietnamese troops into Cambodia, ending the Khmer Rouge Regime."

"I think there must have been some kind of deal there."

"Vietnamese soldiers got no pay or food from their government. They had to steal from the people. The Vietnamese soldiers randomly killed people."

"My sister knew a teacher who survived, and took us into his house. He was the mayor of the province, appointed by Hun Sen. But, when some guerillas were killed by the Vietnamese, the mayor was accused of collaboration, and he was killed. So, we lost our place to live."

His siblings went to the coast to look for work in a factory. Matt's was recruited into Hun Sen's army, under Vietnamese control.

"They were rounding up Khmer Rouge and killing them. You think you would want revenge for what had happened. But even when I had a gun in my hand, I couldn't kill the Khmer Rouge. I was not a murderer."

The only hint at vengeance Matt ever made was "If I had money and time I want to find out who killed my parents."

"My younger brother was very street smart, much more than me. If I had to live in the ghetto or hustle, I would never survive. He went with the Vietnamese army, and he was happy."

"The commander liked me and trusted me not to run away. The next day, we were supposed to go on a large offensive, and I ran to Thailand. Two other boys went with me, but they turned back. Most likely, they were arrested and killed."

In a camp in Thailand, he began doing volunteer work for aid organizations. Originally, he had been planning to go back to Cambodia, join the Khmer Serey, and fight against the Vietnamese occupation.

"But working for the aid organizations opened my mind. I realized I had been living in a tiny fish bowl. And, I never wanted to live like that again."

Matt began writing random letters to people in the west, asking them to sponsor him for immigration. One day, he got a response from a judge in North Dakota.

"The judge was Jewish, a survivor of the Holocaust. So, he was very interested in helping me."

"I remember it vividly, when he picked me up at the airport. It was a completely different world. There was a blizzard when I arrived. It was the first time I ever saw snow."

One of the psychological impacts of the trauma which Matt, and other refugees, experienced is that he tries to cut all of his ties with the past.

"I lost contact with the judge. He is most likely dead now, because he would be very old."

Matt found it impossible to live in North Dakota. On the recommendation of some Khmer friends, he moved to Maryland, and lived in a home with several other refugees. He finished high school, graduated from a college, and then studied at George Mason University, majoring in Engineering.

Matt was on his way to becoming one of the major success stories for the Khmer community, when suddenly, in his final semester of school, his years of suffering caught up with him.

"I just snapped." He said. "I quit university. My father had been a devout Buddhist, but I stopped going to temple. I broke off with all of my friends, and I didn't want to know anyone."

Matt went from job to job, working in restaurants, doing security, and driving taxis, never getting close to anyone. Obviously desperately looking for a family he had said, "The judge was like a father to me" And, "The military commander was like a family to me." And, "The people I lived with in Maryland were like a family to me." But he broke his ties with all of them.

As we talked, I felt honored that Matt trusted me enough to open up and share his story. At the same time, I felt he probably needed to talk. And, I wondered how many Khmers must be walking around with some type of post-traumatic stress disorder, and are desperately in need of counseling, which their cultural norms would prevent them from seeking out.

At age 41, Matt is still single, with no marriage in sight. "I can't even deal with myself. I take life too seriously. I see a lot of sadness."

"I cherish where I come from." said Matt. "But, I have tried to distance myself from anything that reminds me of the Khmer Rouge time. I tried to watch the film, The Killing Fields, but I couldn't. I lived through it, why did I need to watch the movie?"

"Right now, I can't believe that for 20 years I had little or no contact with my people. I even lost my language. When I meet old people, I don't remember how to communicate with them. You have to address them a certain way, according to age and class, to show respect." He shook his head.

"You speak Khmer better than me. I thought that could never happen. I was so good before."

"I used to write well. Now I struggle to write the names of my family members. If I found them I would enlist a translator to communicate with them."

He kept asking me about modern Cambodia, and would shake his head remorsefully when I told him about the lawlessness, low levels of education, joblessness and lack of hope.

"They were born in a period of time when they experienced no normalcy and no stability."

Matt had this to say about the proposed Khmer Rouge tribunals. "The trial is a travesty and a waste of time. By the time they start, these people will all be dead. And the ones who are alive show no remorse. Hun Sen hasn't pushed for the trial, maybe because he is one of them."

"We lost too much, everything..."

"Sometimes I dream about helping the Cambodians, but I have nothing to offer. I know what it is like to be destitute and hopeless I struggle with my own conflict those people right now need so much help. It's not a good feeling."

"I feel I failed myself. Earlier, all my friends expected me to do so well. When you lose your culture, it is hard to restore your pride. They all expected me to do well. The best student in my group, I quit the university and ties with all my old friends."

Matt's life is a lonely one.

"At home only did homework, play chess, and read books. My parents didn't want me to play or ride a bicycle. I never had any exposure to the real world. So, now I have no social skills. I live with a Philippine family who treat me like a son. They want me to go out and socialize, but I don't want to."

"In this country, when you meet people, they ask, what do you do for a living? I am shy. I don't want to say I am only a taxi driver. If they gave me an hour to tell my story, I could explain what I have been through."

"But, they never give you an hour."

"In 1975, we had burned all of our other photos so that the Khmer Rouge wouldn't discover my father in uniform. Only one photo of my mother survived. My sister carried it, secretly, and kept it safe from 1975-1979. She gave me that picture when I left for Thailand, and I have always carried it with me, thinking my mother would protect me."

"If my parents had lived, I would have been motivated to succeed. But now, I have no reason to push myself."

"I have no family, no one to care for me."

"We think, why me? But, the same thing happened in Rwanda and Bosnia. I have to let it go. I can't move on in my life till I let it go."

Please help: Matt would like to find his sister, Sok Pola, who he estimates would be in her late twenties, and most likely living in either Koh Kong or Sihanookville. He believes she is married and working in a garment factory. Matt was born in 1963. His Khmer name is Sok Sonang, and the family is from Tutapong, Phnom Penh, with homeland in Kampong Cham.

*Antonio Graceffo is a freelance journalist and published author who spent eighteen months in Cambodia, publishing over 100 articles and writing two books about the plight of the modern Khmers. His books are available on amazon.com*

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