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Survivor Gently Adds Voices to Cambodia's Dark Tale

By Seth Mydans

Prek Keo, Cambodia — Youk Chhang knelt among the coconut palms behind an isolated Buddhist temple and began asking, very gently, how a man named Sous Thy had become part of the killing machine of the Khmer Rouge.

Mr. Sous Thy, then a weathered farmer of 45, squatted beside him in this quiet, private place 10 years ago, revealing bit by bit the secrets he had kept for the past quarter century.

Yes, he said, he had taken part in the killings, when 1.7 million Cambodians lost their lives from 1975 to 1979. He had been recruited as a teenager, knowing nothing but the rice fields around him, and had lived in terror every day that he himself would be killed.

Mr. Youk Chhang listened quietly, taking notes, passing no judgment. He had been one of the victims of the Khmer Rouge, a half-starved boy who lost more family members than he wants to remember.

Now, in both a public and a personal mission, he was trying to fit the pieces of those years together, to document, even if it was beyond understanding, how a nation could devour itself with such ferocity.

Mr. Youk Chhang, who is now 45, heads the Documentation Center of Cambodia, a private organization that over the past decade has collected a trove of 600,000 pages of documents, 6,000 photographs and 200 documentary films recording the Khmer Rouge rule.

With financing mostly from the United States government and from Sweden, he and a staff that has now grown to 50 people have mapped about 20,000 mass grave sites, 189 prisons and 80 memorials, and have transcribed 4,000 interviews with former members of the Khmer Rouge.

Since his meeting with Mr. Sous Thy in a village not far from Phnom Penh, Mr. Youk Chhang has studied the stories of more former Khmer Rouge cadres than perhaps anybody else.

And he has concluded that people like Mr. Sous Thy and people like himself could quite easily have changed places.

"They are us, and we are them," he said in an interview in his small office in Phnom Penh where photographs of victims and killers hang on the walls. "They are the evil side of us. Crimes are committed by human beings, by people just like me."

In July, after years of delay, a special prosecutor's office opened a formal investigation into the Khmer Rouge crimes, the first step in a process financed by the United Nations to bring top leaders to trial.

Mr. Youk Chhang has handed over hundreds of thousands of documents and other materials that will form the core of the evidence to be presented in court, probably next year.

He has little sympathy for the self-satisfied, self-justifying leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime, now living freely in Cambodia, who are the targets of the investigation. Fewer than a dozen are likely to face trial.

But after so many encounters with lower-ranking Khmer Rouge, he has found a sense of kinship with people whose actions he abhors. "I want to imagine what I would have done," he said. "What would I have said to myself 28 years ago? There were all those people my age, just little kids, naïve, innocent."

Mr. Youk Chhang was 14 when the Khmer Rouge seized power, forcing him into hard labor in the fields. Food and death became his twin obsessions. His father, an architect, died before the Khmer Rouge time. His mother survived and lives today in Phnom Penh.

Decades later, the sound of the early-morning bell from his work brigade still disturbs his thoughts.

"You can hear it deep inside your soul, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang," he said. "It's like the sound of death. It's 3 in the morning and you've got to go to work, and you know you will see people dying that day in the fields around you."

His experiences have left him with a horror of physical brutality of even the most minor sort.

"When I see people hit their children, I cannot take this," he said. Once, he said, he canceled an official meeting at a school when he saw a teacher strike a student. "I couldn't talk to him. I had to leave. I feel it's unacceptable to do harm to humans."

As soon as he could, at the end of the Khmer Rouge years, Mr. Youk Chhang joined a flood of hundreds of thousands of refugees and found a new home in Dallas, where he married and earned a college degree. His two children, now 14 and 15, still live there, and he said they understood only a little about the Khmer Rouge years.

But although he had found health, safety and a new life, he said, he remained broken inside, like almost all survivors of those traumatic years, whatever role they had played.

"The physical pain is gone," he said. "But your heart, it is so hard to put back together. It is like a stained-glass window in a church, all the colors smashed on the floor. I thought,

"How do they put it back together?"

Searching for answers, he began assisting Ben Kiernan, a Cambodia expert at Yale University, who in 1995 sent him back to Cambodia to open the documentation center.

One of the strangest things Mr. Youk Chhang has discovered as he has interviewed survivors and explored his own feelings is nostalgia. Even in the most terrible conditions, a moment of life is precious and fleeting, and when it is gone we may long for it.

When Mr. Youk Chhang showed Mr. Sous Thy a photograph of himself from his Khmer Rouge personnel file, the former cadre's face softened with memories. "That was my youth," he said, gazing at the picture.

Mr. Youk Chhang's memories are very different, but embedded in the horrors are moments of intense feeling, even happiness, that draw him back.

"In the darkness," he said, "any color, people treasure it, treasure the color of the sugar cane we grow. You treasure the beauty because it was so dark. You treasure the color of the straw that you use to make a roof. You treasure the smell of mint that you grew."

Nothing in his safe life today is as vivid as those moments stolen from fear. None of his feelings are as sharp as the gratitude he felt for his mother, who gave him her food when he was ill and hoarded grains of rice for him when he was away. "I am doing all of this for my mother, honestly," he said.

"She loved to cook for us, and she loved the crab that we caught in the rice fields," he said, remembering the Khmer Rouge years. "We would fish for the crabs with a bamboo basket, and whenever we got a crab we would laugh; we were so happy."

"I wish I could go back, to be in that moment again," he said. "I wish I could go back and tell her that I love her."

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