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A Survivor Revisits the Killing Fields

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.

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

Yes, he said, he had been a record keeper at Tuol Sleng prison, the torture chamber where at least 14,000 people died during Khmer Rouge rule, from 1975 to 1979, when 1.7 million Cambodians lost their lives.

He had been recruited as a teenager, knowing nothing but the rice fields around him, he said, and had spent his years at the prison, hearing the screams of the tortured prisoners, terrified for his own life.

"Every day, I worried that I myself could be arrested like the others," he said, "and if you were arrested, you were sure to be killed."

Youk Chhang listened quietly, taking notes, passing no judgment. He was just a few years younger than Sous Thy and 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, Youk Chhang 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.

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 funding mostly from the U.S. government and from Sweden, he and a staff that has now grown to 50 people have mapped some 20,000 mass grave sites, 189 prisons and 80 memorials, and have transcribed 4,000 interviews with former Khmer Rouge cadre.

Since his meeting 10 years ago with Sous Thy in a village not far from Phnom

Penh, Youk Chhang has studied the stories of more former Khmer Rouge cadre than perhaps anybody else.

And he has concluded that people like 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 both 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 funded by the United Nations to bring top leaders to trial.

Youk Chhang has handed over hundreds of thousands of documents and other material 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.

"The fascinating thing to me is talking to the perpetrators," he said. "I want to imagine what I would have done. What would I have said to myself 28 years ago? There were all those people my age, just little kids, naive, innocent."

Youk Chhang was 14 when the Khmer Rouge seized power, and like many teenagers, he was forced into hard labor in the fields, with food and death his twin obsessions.

His father, an architect, died before the Khmer Rouge time. His mother, an illiterate farmer, 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 three 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."

One of his sisters was accused of eating stolen rice and died when her stomach was cut open, he said. He never learned whether this was a botched primitive medical procedure or some savage means of testing her guilt.

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, Youk Chhang joined a flood of hundreds of thousands of refugees and found a new home in Dallas, Texas, where he married and earned a college degree. His two children, now 14 and 15, still live there, and he said they understand 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, and in 1995, Kiernan sent him to Cambodia to open the documentation center.

"So I turned back, after all these thousands of miles, after crossing the land mines, crossing to the United States," he said. "You feel you should be free, but you're not."

One of the strangest things 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 Youk Chhang showed 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.

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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