CAMBODIAN SURVIVOR STORIES

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| **LIENG** **A medical doctor tells her story.**"April 17, 1975 is stamped on my mind because our lives were changed forever after that date. I could have left Cambodia before 1975, but I didn't consider it because I had no idea the Khmer Rouge would be so cruel. I was in my fifth year of medical school at the time. My father was a surgeon and he wanted one of his children to become a doctor. I agreed because practicing medicine is a service."*Lieng's husband was also a medical student and they had 2 young children. The Khmer Rouge ordered them to move into a work camp.*"For four years I lived like a slave. At first my job was to dig out tree stumps, which was very difficult work. Later I was assigned the miserable task of making compost from human feces. In 1976 there were 20 families living in my village. One by one they were killed. By 1977, only four families in our village were left. Terrified that we would be the next to die, we focused solely on our work and never spoke to each other."*In 1979 the Vietnamese ousted the Khmer Rouge and Lieng returned home.* "As soon as I arrived in Phnom Penh I went directly to my old house hoping to find my relatives, but no one was there. I walked through the empty house and saw that most things were just as we left them, four years ago. Our books on Buddhism were still on the shelf, along with my husband's class notes. A Vietnamese soldier came in and told me that no one was permitted to live in that area. As I was leaving, I stopped and wrote a message to my family on the front gate saying that I had come looking for them." *No one read the message. Everyone in Lieng's family had died including her parents, her husband and her sisters.*"After the Khmer Rouge regime there were only forty doctors left in the country. Nearly all the older doctors had died, so we had no specialists or experts. There wasn't a single psychiatrist in Cambodia. Only eighteen out of the fifty medical students in my class survived, and I was the only woman. I went back to medical school and graduated in nine months because Cambodia desperately needed doctors. I became director of a hospital's emergency and recovery rooms. Some of my colleagues worked in Cambodia for a while and then went to live abroad because the conditions here were so terrible..."In 1992 I passed the entrance exam to get a postgraduate degree in anesthesiology and went through a three-year program with nine other doctors, studying under a visiting French expert at the University of Phnom Penh. It was more difficult to remember the lessons because I am older. I finished school at age fifty, which is retirement age, but I agreed to work and teach in the medical school for six years." *Lieng wanted to do this because there was only one trained anesthesiologist in all of Cambodia.*"I don't worry as much as I used to. I feel satisfied knowing that I chose a good husband for my daughter. My son is studying at the Institute of Agriculture, and he will get a job when he graduates. I just continue to work hard and am patient, because to be human is to always have problems, big or small. People see that I am strong and solid, like a stone, but my heart is very soft."<http://www.friendshipwithcambodia.org/soulsurvivors/canvas-stories-01.htm>  **SAROAN** **An orphaned boy who came to America and then returned to Cambodia as a young adult tells his story.**"When the Khmer Rouge took over we ceased being the children of our parents and became the children of Angka, the government. The Khmer Rouge came and took all of the children and separated us by age, and sent us to live at work camps. There were about 200 children in my work group, and we slept in long bamboo shacks with the girls on one side and the boys on the other. We worked everyday, from sunrise to sunset, weeding gardens and chasing birds out of rice fields."*One day a little girl named Sopheap who knew Saroan's family told him that their parents had been killed. Saroan knew they would be the next to die because the Khmer Rouge had a policy of killing the whole family. So he made a plan to run away.* "I put on two pairs of dark pants and two dark shirts, the kind the Khmer Rouge made us wear, and went down near the river to wait in the orange garden for Sopheap. As the sun set and it grew dark, I thought she decided not to come, and I was about to leave when she arrived. I told her we had to make up a story so people wouldn't be suspicious. We would tell them that we were brother and sister and that our father died of starvation, so they would take pity on us. We crossed the river and walked all night, to a distant village in another sector, barefoot, because no one had shoes. My plan worked and we were taken in and fed, and put into another work camp.""Once a month, the Khmer Rouge at this camp let the children go home to visit their parents for a couple hours and have a meal with them. Those of us who didn't have parents didn't get any food that day. One orphaned boy named Jong had a small bag of rice. He was starving and hungry like the rest of us, but that day he shared his rice with me and two other boys who had nothing to eat. Soon afterward we were separated and I never saw him again. Sometimes, when I am lying in bed at night and not able to sleep, I think of his generosity and tears come to my eyes. He is like my angel."*In 1978 the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and started fighting the Khmer Rouge.*"One night, I slipped away and followed other people who were leaving the country. I had no food or gold, but people fed me because we all cared for each other. I felt lucky, as if someone up there were watching me and helping me. I walked mostly at night, afraid of meeting soldiers. As I was walking, I saw the back of a man who I thought was my father. Full of joy, I went running up to him crying 'Father, father.' He turned around and said, 'I'm sorry son, I'm not your father.' I kept hoping I would find my father. A guide took us through the jungle and across the border, avoiding the landmines. I reached Thailand, but I didn't know where my grandparents lived. Bangkok was too big to find them in, so I stayed in the refugee camp orphanage."*Saroan came to live in America. He lived with 3 foster families, and eventually finished high school and worked his way through college.* "After graduating in computer science, I went back to Cambodia. A friend of mine in the refugee camp had gone back and he suggested that I come too. I had no family left in Cambodia and the thought of returning frightened me. Then I said to myself, 'Why should I be afraid of my own country?' I wanted to help the people there…"The thought 'I can't believe I am here today' often passes through my mind. I have been through so much, but these experiences have made me strong. I don't care how poor I am or how down I am, I know I can get by. Each time I go through bad times I know I have nothing to lose. I came here and saw that Cambodian needs its overseas Khmer to come back and help, especially those of us who have an education or degree. I want to tell my grandchildren that I was part of rebuilding Cambodia."<http://www.friendshipwithcambodia.org/soulsurvivors/canvas-stories-01.htm> |

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