

Sophal Ear: Escaping the Khmer Rouge

I normally teach courses on how to rebuild states after war. But today I've got a personal story to share with you. This is a picture of my family, my four siblings -- my mom and I -- taken in 1977. And we're actually Cambodians. And this picture is taken in Vietnam. So how did a Cambodian family end up in Vietnam in 1977? Well to explain that, I've got a short video clip to explain the Khmer Rouge regime during 1975 and 1979.

Video: April 17th, 1975. The communist Khmer Rouge enters Phnom Penh to liberate their people from the encroaching conflict in Vietnam, and American bombing campaigns. Led by peasant-born Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge evacuates people to the countryside in order to create a rural communist utopia, China. But after four years the grim truth seeps out. In a country of only seven million people, one and a half million were murdered by their own leaders, their bodies piled in the mass graves of the killing fields.

Sophal Ear: So, notwithstanding the 1970s narration, on April 17th 1975 we lived in Phnom Penh. And my parents were told by the Khmer Rouge to evacuate the city because of impending American bombing for three days. And this is very normal now, of modern day conflict, because they're easy to bring into wars.

The reason that they gave about American bombing wasn't all that far off. I mean, from 1965 to 1973 there were more munitions that fell on Cambodia than in all of World War II Japan, including the two nuclear bombs of August 1945. The Khmer Rouge didn't believe in money. So the equivalent of the Federal Reserve Bank in Cambodia was bombed. But not just that, they actually banned money. I think it's the only precedent in which money has ever been stopped from being used. And we know money is the root of all evil, but it didn't actually stop evil from happening in Cambodia, in fact.

My family was moved from Phnom Penh to Pursat province. This is a picture of what Pursat looks like. It's actually a very pretty area of Cambodia, where rice growing takes place. And in fact they were forced to work the fields. So my father and mother ended up in a sort of concentration camp, labor camp.

And it was at that time that my mother got word from the commune chief that the Vietnamese were actually asking for their citizens to go back to Vietnam. And she spoke some Vietnamese, as a child having grown up with Vietnamese friends. And she decided, despite the advice of her neighbors, that she would take the chance and claim to be Vietnamese so that we could have a chance to survive, because at this point they're forcing everybody to work. And they're giving about -- in a modern-day, caloric-restriction diet, I guess -- they're giving porridge, with a few grains of rice.

And at about this time actually my father got very sick. Vietnamese. And it made it possible, in fact, for us to take on this plan. So the Khmer Rouge took us from a place called Pursat to Kaoh Tiev, which is across from the border

from Vietnam. And there they had a detention camp where alleged Vietnamese would be tested, language tested.

And my mother's Vietnamese was so bad that to make our story more credible, she'd given all the boys and girls new Vietnamese names. But she'd given the boys girls' names, and the girls boys' names. And it wasn't until she met a Vietnamese lady who told her this, and then tutored her for two days intensively, that she was able to go into her exam and -- you know, this was a moment of truth. If she fails, we're all headed to the gallows; if she passes, we can leave to Vietnam. And she actually, of course -- I'm here, she passes. And we end up in Hong Ngu on the Vietnamese side. And then onwards to Chau Doc. And this is a picture of Hong Ngu, Vietnam today. A pretty idyllic place on the Mekong Delta. But for us it meant freedom. And freedom from persecution from the Khmer Rouge.

Last year, the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, which the U.N. is helping Cambodia take on, started, and I decided that as a matter of record I should file a Civil Complaint with the Tribunal about my father's passing away. And I got word last month that the complaint was officially accepted by the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. And it's for me a matter of justice for history, and accountability for the future, because Cambodia remains a pretty lawless place, at times.

Five years ago my mother and I went back to Chau Doc. And she was able to return to a place that for her meant freedom, but also fear, because we had just come out of Cambodia. I'm happy, actually, today, to present her. She's here today with us in the audience. Thank you mother.

(Applause)