TRAGEDY AND
TRIUMPH

CAMBODIA’S GENOCIDE THROUGH THE FACES
AND STORIES OF THE SURVIVORS

CHAD WILLIAMS
For Sedtha, Vudthy and the entire BFT Family who have given me a lifetime of inspiration and a second home in Cambodia.
The Author with Sedatha Long and his family
The Cambodian plight was largely ignored by the outside world until 1975. The Indochina Wars, conflicts that in name included Cambodia and neighboring Laos, were in reality conflicts fought against the rise of communism in Vietnam. Vietnam had been the most economically important colony to the French in the First Indochina war, and it later became the battleground of the United States’ fight against communism in the Second.

Cambodia, a small and long-quiet nation made up principally of rural farmers, failed to find the international spotlight unless it was being bombed as part of the conflict tearing apart its neighbor. However, with the collapse of the American-backed Southern Vietnamese government in 1975 came the collapse of the American-backed Cambodian government. While Vietnam found peace, Cambodia’s suffering had only just begun.

Over the next three years, eight months and 20 days, the Cambodian people endured one of the most brutal revolutionary communist regimes of the 20th century. Under the leadership of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge oversaw a policy of killing, torture and fear that would rival any of history’s darkest genocides in both its tenacity and scope.

It was a brutality that then, and for years to come, would be unfathomable to the few foreign journalists who covered it, to many of the cadre who perpetuated it, and to historians who studied it – but most of all to the Cambodian people themselves.

What began as a fight against the educated intelligentsia and supporters of the former government would grow to include ethnic minorities, the Buddhist clergy and eventually the Khmer Rouge cadre and senior leadership themselves. It was a violence born out of paranoia and terror, a violence that knew no ends. When the dust settled after the Khmer Rouge’s fiery and exhaustive rule, one of every four Cambodians was dead from starvation, disease or execution - an estimated two million people.

The brutality of the Khmer Rouge was as shocking as it was boundless, and has left survivors and observers alike baffled by its sheer scale and horror. Many of those who survived, some of whom are featured in this book, still cannot fully comprehend what took place under the Khmer Rouge. The phrase “Khmer can’t kill Khmer” is one that comes up frequently in discussions about the genocide in contemporary Cambodia and signifies the disbelief of many Cambodians that it was their own countrymen that slaughtered each other.

This disbelief is only confounded by how recently the killing took place. The 17th of April, 2015 was the 40th anniversary of the final takeover by Khmer Rouge of the capital, Phnom Penh, a city which today buzzes with an air of optimism that hasn’t been felt since the years before the Khmer Rouge. However, even as Phnom Penh and the rest of the country has become less recognizable from the nation that tore itself apart 40 years ago, the horror of the Khmer Rouge has not been easily forgotten by those who survived it. This contrast between contemporary Cambodia’s optimistic development and the continued pain experienced by those who survived its genocide has become a defining characteristic for the country.

On a broad level, the progression of this project has been rooted in that dichotomy, but it was originally inspired by a man who directly personifies the contradiction between suffering and success, between terror and compassion. That man’s name is Sedtha Long. I first met Sedtha when I was sixteen years old, touring Cambodia with my family. My mother had been a member of the U.S. Peace Corps in her years after college and wanted for us to spend part of our vacation volunteering, to give back. It was less than a day after touching down in Siem Reap, Cambodia, that we were all sitting in Sedtha’s office at the Build Your Future Today Center (BFT), hearing his story first hand.
Sedtha’s story as a victim to the Khmer Rouge struck me from the moment he started telling it. He was there in Phnom Penh when the Khmer Rouge stormed the city. Only weeks later he was split from his family and sent to the worst and most deadly parts of the country.

As a young man of sixteen, Sedtha was forced into doing hard labor day in and day out, planting rice paddies, clearing forests and damming rivers by hand, all the while being fed next to nothing. He flirted with death more times than he can count from starvation, disease and exhaustion, and the horror of what he bore witness to will haunt him until the day he dies. However, beyond all of the suffering that Sedtha has had to endure, what captivated me most about him then and now has been what he has chosen to do since coming out the other side.

In the years after the Khmer Rouge, Sedtha has dedicated himself wholly to rebuilding what they destroyed. From adopting hundreds of children orphaned by the Khmer Rouge into his own family, to working with the UN to help institute the country’s first modern election, to eventually founding BFT to build schools and roads far into the countryside, Sedtha has refused to allow what the Khmer Rouge took from him define his life. It was this spirit of perseverance and compassion that first stirred my fascination with Cambodia. This is what has inspired the name of this book, Tragedy and Triumph.

Since that first trip to Cambodia, I have been lucky enough to return twice more to Cambodia, living there for almost six months between high school and college, working with Sedtha and BFT. In that time I have gotten to know Sedtha’s one surviving brother, Vudthy, whose story in many ways both parallels and contrasts Sedtha’s. Their stories together have inspired this book, but through my time spent in Cambodia, it has grown beyond just these two incredible men.

Tragedy and Triumph is not just Sedtha’s and Vudthy’s story, but the story of an entire generation of Cambodians. It is a story ingrained in history, but is ultimately a story about those individuals who went through the horror of the Khmer Rouge and came out the other side. By giving voice and shedding light on those who have survived, my intention is to give testament to their lives and to show that Cambodia’s story is not just one of Tragedy, but also of Triumph.

Chad Williams
Siem Reap, Cambodia
Toch Pheng, a former monk and survivor of one of Cambodia’s infamous damn building projects

An illiterate woman in rural Siem Reap escapes the midday sun

Children wait in line for school supplies from BFT

Yon Kim Srey, a survivor of Kandal’s killing fields, reflects on her past in a stupa honoring those killed

Chhang Youk, who escaped to the United States in the years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, in his office in Phnom Penh.
The 17th of April, 1975, was the day Sedtha calls “The Day Everything Changed”. That morning the Khmer Rouge stormed Phnom Penh and infamously evacuated the entire population of the city into the rural countryside, initiating what became a countrywide system of forced labor. Sedtha survived only by becoming what he today describes as a “perfect slave”.

Sedtha abandoned his entire identity as an educated high school student, changed his name, upended the way he spoke and obeyed every command given to him by the Khmer Rouge. His survival depended entirely on keeping his head down and his mouth shut, even as he was starving, shaking with disease or collapsing from exhaustion.

The physical burden of what the Khmer Rouge put upon Sedtha’s shoulders would be matched only by the pain of having to bear witness to the worst crimes of the Khmer Rouge. It was rare for anyone outside the Khmer Rouge’s secretive ranks to witness what they did with the workers that mysteriously disappeared, but in some horrific misfortune Sedtha was given a front row seat to the way the Khmer Rouge disposed of “dissidents”.

“We were working from the early morning, from 5 or 4:30 and until 11 or 12 without stop and without breakfast, and when you come back to the kitchen you get milk and some liquid rice soup. It doesn’t matter if it was enough, they didn’t care. After thirty minutes we had to go back to the rice field and work none stop until 6 in the evening when we would have dinner and it was the same, rice soup. After dinner we go back and work again until 11 or 12 at night.”

In the dying days of their regime, the Khmer Rouge looked to any scapegoat to explain why their revolution was failing. First it was the educated class of the previous government, corrupted by Western ‘Imperialism’. Then it was the CIA, the KGB and finally the Vietnamese. Ethnic Vietnamese were rounded up and slaughtered wholesale as ‘traitors’ and ‘spies’. The only crime of the ‘dissidents’ that Sedtha watched murdered was that they were ethnically Vietnamese. After almost four years of chaos and seclusion, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in late 1978 and early 1979. The Khmer Rouge’s regime quickly disintegrated.

In the chaos of the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, Sedtha tried to make his way to the Thai border, with the rumor of refugee camps guiding his way. He had little idea of where he was going, had no way to know what to expect when he got there, couldn’t travel on roads and didn’t know whom he could trust, but for the first time in almost four years he was free. It was with that freedom that Sedtha, as a nineteen-year-old, made a decision that came to define his life in as positive a way as the Khmer Rouge’s conquest of Phnom Penh had been negative. He chose to help.

“I still remember that we heard the sound of knocking on the door…and my brother telling me to go and open it. As soon as I opened the door I felt shocked and horrified to find standing in front of me a group of soldiers dressed in black uniforms and carrying rifles. They came into the house, aiming their rifles at my family, and told us to leave, to rush, saying ‘the Americans are going to bomb the city. Go now!’ They told us not to take any of our belongings, that we would return home in a few days. We never did.”

“…”We were working from the early morning, from 5 or 4:30 and until 11 or 12 without stop and without breakfast, and when you come back to the kitchen you get milk and some liquid rice soup. It doesn’t matter if it was enough, they didn’t care. After thirty minutes we had to go back to the rice field and work none stop until 6 in the evening when we would have dinner and it was the same, rice soup. After dinner we go back and work again until 11 or 12 at night.”
By the time Sedtha arrived at the refugee camps on the border, he had twenty children under his care. By the time he repatriated back to Cambodia more than ten years later, he had helped raise more than one hundred. To this day, Sedtha still takes in orphans and provides free education to hundreds more from his home in Siem Reap. Through Sedtha’s NGO and life’s work, the Build Your Future Today Center (BFT), he has helped develop more than thirty villages in rural Cambodia, build schools, roads, wells, hire teachers, and establish microfinance programs along with a number of other development projects aimed at raising critically poor communities out of poverty to give their children a chance at an education.

Sedtha’s life has been one marked by the overwhelmingly tragic horrors of the Khmer Rouge, something that will stay with him until the day he dies. However, the most defining and powerful part of Sedtha’s life has been not in what was taken away from him, but rather in what he has given back. Sedtha has refused to be defined or defeated by the tragedy that was the Khmer Rouge, and with every breath he takes and every child he lifts out of poverty, he declares his triumph over them.

The most recent estimates put BFT’s reach at more than 50,000 people.

“I don’t really know how I changed my behavior or my mindset. I used to be the one who would always think about hatred, or wanting to find revenge…it made me so depressed and sad…I used to be disappointed, not only to the Khmer Rouge. Where is the Buddha? He sleeps too much! Enjoy too much by himself while we suffer…but when I started seeing the children, I found the younger children were suffering more than me. When I met them, they felt horrified and confused and they didn’t have any hope. And compared to myself, they didn’t have anything…Eventually I thought “I have to help these kids rather than keep this hatred in mind. Probably that was the point that I changed my life.”
“The Khmer Rouge tell you ‘You have no father. You have no mother. We are all now brothers and sisters and brother number one is Pol Pot’”.
The youngest in the family, Vudthy was barely fourteen years old when Sedtha opened the door to the Khmer Rouge on the 17th of April. He had been in the kitchen, his mother helping dress him for school, totally oblivious to what was about to happen to him.

It was barely two weeks after the fall of Phnom Penh before the Khmer Rouge split the Long family apart. The family had managed to stay together during the evacuation of the capital, and for ten days they walked together with thousands of others into the countryside. Over the next few days the family was picked apart. Each sister, brother, uncle and aunt was tasked with a different job and sent to different locales within Cambodia. Vudthy, being so young, was initially sent to the closest thing the Khmer Rouge had to a school. That ‘school’ amounted to little more than lessons in indoctrination. For Vudthy, even as a fourteen-year-old boy, being told what to do, what he could or could not eat, where to sleep and how to think by the Khmer Rouge was unacceptable, no matter the punishment for disobedience. Vudthy did whatever he could to be independent of the Khmer Rouge. He stole food, worked slowly, ran away and refused to bend to the cadre. Their punishments ranged from public humiliation to beatings to torture, but still Vudthy refused to obey. It was a stubborn disobedience that granted him the hatred of his cadre then and has left him peppered with scars today.

There were no doctors, no nurses, no clinics, and no medical equipment. Vudthy’s eye quickly became infected and swelled to the size of a baseball. He came down with fevers and broke out in cold sweats as his frail body tried to fight off the infection. In the absence of any drugs to relieve his suffering, Vudthy was rendered immobile from the pain that wracked his eye and eventually his entire body. He shook in agony, and his mother, helpless, could do little more than “…only hold me, to touch me to console me. No medicine, no medicine.”

Without any sort of medical care, it would take “three or four months” for Vudthy’s eye to heal. When Vudthy’s eye finally healed, it was little more than soft, milky-colored tissue. He has never regained any sort of functionality.

“The Khmer Rouge tell you ‘You have no father. You have no mother. We are all now brothers and sisters and brother number one is Pol Pot’”.

Vudthy, however, was not one to take this sitting down. If Sedtha had been the perfect slave then Vudthy was the stubborn rebel.

“I am very independent in my life, I never want to have any boss, I don’t want to take orders, I don’t like other people’s rules, even when I am young”.

“…they took the branch of the tree and strike on my face… they didn’t have any purpose, but because of the anger they hit me over and over and over and didn’t realize that a piece of thorn break in my eye. In my life I have never felt pain like this… they say the teeth is very painful, but the eye is more than teeth. Very painful, very painful.”
The Khmer Rouge continued to torture Vudthy throughout their reign. Vudthy would run away, he would be caught, tortured and he would answer by only running away again. Under the Khmer Rouge if someone was consistently disobedient, the punishment was almost certainly execution. “If you disobey more than three times, you are killed. But I disobey fifty times, hundred times, I can’t count how many times. Somehow I am still alive, I don’t know how. I don’t know why.”

Vudthy in the years after the Khmer Rouge dedicated himself to Buddha, following in his late father’s footsteps and becoming a monk. His experience under the Khmer Rouge has strengthened his faith, and after being handed down a death verdict more times than he can count, Vudthy views every day as a gift. He today speaks seven languages, teaches Khmer history and culture at a number of universities, has been featured in a BBC documentary as an “Expert on Cambodian History” and works closely with Sedtha and other NGOs on developmental projects to raise literacy throughout the country.
The last words many men, women and even children heard before their execution were, in Vudthy’s words “...if we keep 100 of you, not profit, if we remove 100 of you, not loss”. Thousands of workers across Cambodia disappeared soon after being handed that verdict.

Vudthy has lost count of how many times he has heard those words. Sedtha, through his own thorough disguising of himself, avoided that verdict altogether. Sedtha the perfect slave and Vudthy the stubborn rebel.

Their stories separately tell very different tales, but together shed light on how the Khmer Rouge dragged the people of Cambodia through some of the worst years in history. However, despite the breadth that Sedtha and Vudthy’s stories together reveals about the Khmer Rouge, their experience is but a piece of Cambodia’s story.

Anyone in Cambodia over the age of 45 has a story to tell. From ranking officials in Lon Nol’s government to rural peasants to the cadre and soldiers of the Khmer Rouge themselves. Each of their perspectives shape the way that Cambodia’s history is viewed and acted upon today, making their stories essential in understanding Cambodia’s past Tragedy and how the country is shaping its contemporary Triumph.

What accentuates the importance of these peoples’ individual stories is how personally the genocide was carried out. The Khmer Rouge’s victims weren’t statistics in concentration camps or gulags. The Khmer Rouge’s victims were sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers who were killed by men who saw their faces, knew their names and looked into their eyes.

For the survivors today the burden of history continues to weigh heavy as their stories are left unheard, unseen and unappreciated. However, as living witnesses to the Khmer Rouge’s crimes their perspectives are invaluable in understanding and feeling the importance of what happened in Cambodia. There are millions of faces and pairs of eyes that have witnessed and been through unimaginable circumstance and their stories litter every walk of life throughout Cambodia.

Here are a few of them.
Few people in Cambodia ever saw the executions that were being carried out throughout the country. Quotes such as “I never saw the killings...but at night I could hear the screams” are far more common than first-hand accounts of witnessing a Khmer Rouge execution. Phnom Sampeau, or as it is better known, The Killing Caves, are a perfect example.

It was here, far from any village, that the Khmer Rouge took “traitors” and threw them to their deaths into the caverns at Phnom Sampeau. When the site was excavated in the 1990s, an estimated 7,000 bodies were found. Today the cave has been partially filled in and a stupa (photographed) has been built in order to honor those killed.
More than 14,000 “traitors” went into Cambodia’s infamous S-21 Prison in Phnom Penh under accusations of espionage and betrayal. Upon entry, prisoners were handed their verdicts and whether it took a day, a month or a year, the accused were forced confess to their imagined crimes. Upon confession, the punishment was execution. When the prison was liberated in 1979, there were seven survivors. Today only two are still alive.

Chum Mey, 82, poses outside the prison with his book, Survivor.

“[It] took a long time to write this book… longer time to heal my wounds”

“I could tolerate the pain from being beaten and having my toenail pulled out, but not being electrocuted. That was too much for me. They attached a wire to my ear and it was like my head exploded. My head felt like a machine and my eyes were on fire. I fell on the floor unconscious two times. When I woke up I started telling them what they wanted to hear...I couldn’t tell what was right or wrong.”

- Excerpt from Survivor
Before becoming the torture prison that it is infamous for today, S-21, or Tuol Sleng, was called Chao Ponhea Yat High School. Professor Sabho Amanara, who himself is a survivor of the Khmer Rouge, was a student.

“My memories of secondary school are good ones” Professor Amanara recalls, “I can still hear the sound of my friends playing in the courtyard. I remember my teachers, my classmates and... it makes going back there today very difficult.”

Professor Amanara works as a professor of History and Khmer culture at the Paññasatra University of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. His office is only a few blocks from S-21.
Nhem En
Siem Reap, Cambodia
May 2015

The Khmer Rouge kept extensive records at S-21. Nhem En, at the time a teenager, took all of the prisoners’ incoming photographs. Photographed at his home in Siem Reap, he stands proudly next to his photographs of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge’s leadership.

“There is too much to say...it is too late to have remorse. Why turn around when you can go forward? I can’t go back”
Assigned to damn a river by hand, Toch remembers with painful clarity watching comrades collapse from exhaustion. As a monk who had been disrobed and disallowed any religious rites, Toch wasn’t even able to honor their spirits in death.

“The most painful part was that I couldn’t do anything to help...I was powerless”
More than forty years after the Khmer Rouge, Phan Pov has given up chasing rumors as to the fate of her family.

“Everything I heard, I couldn’t believe. How can so much happen to my family? But ... eventually I have to accept, what choice do I have?”

Pov today refuses to forget the past.

“I testified to a lawyer [from the courts] about my suffering...I tell my children too. It’s important to remember, so this never happens again.”
Samean Monh
Siem Reap, Cambodia
June 2015

“I survived the Khmer Rouge because of two things. My hope to see my family and my fear. I had no control over my decisions, I thought of only food, family and survival. My energy came from fear. Always fear.”

When the Khmer Rouge carted people away, they told the rest of the people their comrades were being sent for “re-education”. Samean, under orders from his cadre, was sent to clean one of these “education centers”.

“The room was black, very dark. On the floor were 20-30 men in the room, all chained by the ankles in the dark...I have always had nightmares.”

Today Samean heads VIR Cambodia, an NGO dedicated to aiding critically vulnerable communities and alleviating literacy. He works closely with Sedtha and BFT.
Kang Yon
Pursat, Cambodia
May 2015

“I could never sleep ... every night I heard the Khmer Rouge
taking people away, I heard them fighting and always thought:
when will I be next?”

“The buddha always guided my life and now that I am an
old man I want to help the Buddha guide other’s lives.
That’s why I survived and that’s why I am again a monk.”
Every ten days Yon Kim Srey’s cooperative held a communal meeting where all of the work groups from the area met and were issued new orders or propaganda. During these brief respites Srey had the opportunity to catch a glimpse of her extended family, but as time went on, she began to notice fewer and fewer family members.

“I could not ask questions...under Angka [The Khmer Rouge], there was no freedom, no rights. You just obey. No one knew anything, they just dissapeared...I never saw anyone killed...but at night I could hear the screams.”

When all the dust settled eighteen members of Srey’s family had perished, including her father and two siblings. Today Srey wants young people to know about the Khmer Rouge, she wants them “to never forget.”
Phok Nyoh’s sector during the Khmer Rouge was deemed ‘corrupted’ and the entire cadre was purged and replaced by more hardline officials. Nyoh heard rumors that the new cadre planned on executing all of the workers in his area, but the Vietnamese took over before he found out if that was true.
Ing-So Vann
Siem Reap, Cambodia
June 2015

Ing-So Vann’s cadre tolerated her and her husband, Chao Yok Vann, until 1977. It was then that the Khmer Rouge started to purge their own ranks, exterminating the cadre and replacing them with even more oppressive and overbearing radicals. They combed through the terrified peasantry, searching for any ‘traitors’ or ‘dissidents’ that may have made it through the cracks.

In the years before the Khmer Rouge Ing-So Vann’s husband had been a teacher and her a student.

“… the comrades came to me in the rice field and tell me ‘your husband is dead. Don’t be like him or you die too.’ Just like that .. .I had two children and now no father.

Ing-So Vann recently retired from working with LICHADHO, a Cambodian NGO that fights for human rights. Her daughter is a teacher.
Chhang Youk  
Phnom Penh, Cambodia  
June 2015

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge’s regime, Chhang escaped to the United States with five dollars in his pocket. Speaking about a cadre member who ate his meager rations during the Khmer Rouge, he says

“The Khmer Rouge was starving him too, how can I hate him? It’s over now”  
Just like that .. .I had two children and now

Chhang is photographed in his Phnom Penh office as the head of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-CAM), an organization dedicated to unearthing and recording the crimes of the Khmer Rouge.
Sao Vann
Pailin, Cambodia
February 2015

As an outsider looking in it’s easy to assume that Cambodia’s history is universally understood, but that’s simply not the case. The Khmer Rouge’s disastrous rule over Cambodia began only forty years ago. The last Khmer Rouge soldiers only stopped fighting in 1998. Many parts of the country today are filled with former Khmer Rouge, living their lives in peace. Pailin, a Cambodian province bordering Thailand, is known especially as a Khmer Rouge safe haven and it is here that Sao Vann, a former Khmer Rouge official, has made her home.

“I have never heard about the execution or starvation of the people at all. Instead I was living at the salt farm with great prosperity. It was until 1979, after the fall of the Khmer Rouge that I started to hear about the killing and starvation.”

“It is normal things during the war. Always people got killed, we cannot only accuse Pol Pot, even the American bombs killed people. The Vietnamese and their installed government tried to constrict work at the border and they were blasted by landmines. Who can say it was the fault of the Khmer Rouge, it could be anybody.”

“I only heard Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge leaders always encouraged the people to do good things. They had a reasonable mission, objective and goals. Mr. Pol Pot never issued an order without thinking...he was a good man.”

Many of the Khmer Rouge’s atrocities were committed on a communal level. When ludicrous quotas assigned to communes weren’t met workers were humiliated, beaten and executed. According to Sao Vann, she never saw any of the killings. She never punished any of her workers and she was unaware of any of the country’s food shortages. Her salt farm lived with “great prosperity”. Her orders were to collect salt and nothing else.

When asked whether she was ever ordered to comb through her workers to find “enemies of the revolution”, she responded by saying “I was just living at a salt farm with my colleagues, living with prosperity...” Her answers were curt, her expression stoic.

Vudthy, who had been translating for me, gave Sao Vann a warm smile and a handshake as we left her house. The moment we got back in the car and the doors closed, his smile dropped from his face. “She is lying.”
Sok Sokhom joined the Khmer Rouge as a teenager when they took over his village. Driving trucks, Sokhom did his best not to question orders. In the years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge’s regime Sokhom fought within their insurgency as a radio operator and soldier. He lost his leg during a skirmish to a landmine likely laid by the Khmer Rouge themselves.

Though Sokhom recognizes the devastation of the Khmer Rouge, he still insists “I identify myself as a Khmer Rouge.”
Un Inn was an early follower of the Khmer Rouge. He joined their revolution during the civil war and supposedly kept himself far from the horrors of the killing fields, though in retrospect he doesn’t deny their existence.

“I lived closely with the boss and didn’t get to go out and see what the field life was like...I didn’t realize about the fact that there were executions and starvation of the people because I was living in the cooperative. Now that I look back, Yes, I do accept and believe what happened during the Khmer Rouge time.”

When asked whether he had ever met Pol Pot, Un responded unassumingly “countless times”.

“Pol Pot is a very humble man, always smiling...[the leadership] were always humble as the dust and as quiet as the monks. They never showed a temper or bad attitude in the public...when I lived with Pol Pot in the jungle I only saw him lie down on the bamboo bed on the floor. Very simple life. He slept with the common people....but the journalist never describe Pol Pot as a good man.

They always try to find faults...we cannot accuse Pol Pot or any of the leadership personally [for the killing]. The Khmer Rouge picked up on the ideology, and it was the fault of those who practiced it in the wrong way. Not the leadership, not Pol Pot and Khieu Samphan, instead it was because of the subordinates and the way that they implemented the communism.”
It is estimated that more than two million people perished during the Khmer Rouge’s nightmarish reign in Cambodia. Photographed is a stupa dedicated to those who were lost under the Khmer Rouge.

The skulls on display were exhumed from a mass grave less than fifty yards from where the photograph was taken.
Heng Soviet
Phnom Penh, Cambodia
June 2015

In order to instill an understanding for the memory of the genocide, Heng organizes events where former Khmer Rouge soldiers speak with students about their part in Cambodia's past. By doing this, Heng stands alone.

“You know, this job is not easy… the police, try to tell me ‘You’re permit is expired, you have to close’ or the professors tell the students not to come to our events… it’s not easy… in Cambodia, history is not dead.”
Sokhom Long
Siem Reap, Cambodia
June 2015

With his voice cracking and tears streaming down his face, Sokhom remembers standing in the hospital holding his infant brother and watching his mother’s limp body be carried away. Sedtha, who had been translating for Sokhom, had to excuse himself.

“I had nothing… I have nothing… no relatives, no friends, no one… I didn’t think… I didn’t feel, I couldn’t… there was no hope. I just followed everyone else and waited to die.”

Today he can’t remember what his surname was before the Khmer Rouge.

Sokhom with his wife and three of his children. His eldest son, Toty, is currently attending university.
Chan Deap
Siem Reap, Cambodia
April 2015

“My daughters...I was in the same field, working in the rice. One day the Khmer Rouge come in truck and take them. I was on the other side of the field. Could do nothing but watch. I...still don’t know if they are dead or not.”
An electrical engineering major from the University of Texas-Austin, Justin escaped the country as a teenager soon after the Khmer Rouge fell, but could “never forget about the Khmer Rouge or Cambodia.”

“My father, they took him. They didn’t tie him up, they just said ‘we want you to work…’ They took him away and I never…I never…never saw him again.”

“As soon as the communism collapsed I, with my friend, went to kill [the cadre leader.] He always beat me with his stick, beat me until I was unconscious. So when the tables turned I went to look for him. I was 20 years old, young blood. When I got to his house and I saw his family, their faces had no blood, pale as a ghosts. They come to greet me, scared for their lives…I just look at them, the father, mother uncle and sister, brothers, and said ‘I changed my mind’ It’s not worth it to kill…”

Justin Dara-Op
Phnom Penh, Cambodia
June 2015
Naem Sakhem  
Siem Reap, Cambodia  
June 2015

On the morning of the 17th of April, 1975, as the Khmer Rouge were overrunning the last parts of the capital, Sakhem, a captain in the nationalist army, was still firing at the Khmer Rouge’s soldiers.

“I never lost faith. We never thought we were going to lose”

“White flags were everywhere. The discipline was lost, but I knew the Khmer Rouge were very bad...I didn’t want to stop fighting”
Chhum Sim
Tramses, Cambodia
May 2015

Chhum avoided the Khmer Rouge’s wrath by keeping his head down, “...I asked no questions, I was invisible...but I have seen many things, many people disappeared from my village”. On one instance the Khmer Rouge found a married couple together at night without permission of their cadre. Chhum watched the Khmer Rouge drag them away the next day and never saw them again.

When Chhum first started telling his children and grandchildren about the Khmer Rouge, they didn’t believe him. “They didn’t believe me, they say ‘How can this be possible? How can they kill so many?’ but I insisted; it’s important to know the history...we cannot forget”
Chamroen met Sedtha at the Cambodia-Thailand border as a child and was one of his first students learning English. For years he lived with Sedtha, thinking his entire family was dead. He now works at the Angkor Hospital for Children.
The village of Cham Resh, more than 80 kilometers from Siem Reap, was mostly illiterate ten years ago. Ganng, a volunteer teacher, works with the local children to develop their basic literacy and arithmetic, giving them a chance at an education they would never have been able to dream of otherwise.
Sam Sek  
Siem Reap, Cambodia  
June 2015

Sek, split from her family and forced into labor was put to work on the border with Thailand. Heavily mined, she and her comrades had to dig in flooded rice paddies without knowing what was beneath their feet.

“Every few days you just hear Boom! And you know some person hit a mine. One time it was extra loud (probably an undetonated mortar) and five people...gone.”

While out working in the rice paddies, “traitors of the revolution” would be paraded out amongst those working, serving as a grim reminder of what happened if you refused to work, talked back or tried to eat more than what was given to you.

“They brought the enemy out to the fields, with a rope from the neck and walked them past, yelling ‘He is a traitor! He has stolen from you!’ Whenever they bring those prisoners, I never saw them again.”
Som Touch “Tep”
Siem Reap, Cambodia
June 2014

For many hope gave them a purpose, but as time marched on in the years after the Khmer Rouge that hope often grew to become devastating. Repatriating from a refugee camp in 1989, Tep spend years searching for his brother, chasing rumors until “the hope became too painful…it had been too long…too long…”
Tep stands overlooking the border between Cambodia and Thailand. 35 years ago this expanse of land was used as a refugee camp for tens of thousands of Cambodians fleeing the Khmer Rouge’s devastation.
A monument erected in the courtyard of S-21, now a museum documenting the crimes of the Khmer Rouge.

“Never will we forget the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge”
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