

2014

SOK TANN-LIFE STORY

From Cambodia to the United States and
Freedom



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FROM CAMBODIA TO THE UNITED STATES AND FREEDOM

COMPILED BY

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2013-2014

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Taylorsville, Utah

FOREWARD

I met Sok in 1996 while I was working as the Supervisor of the Salt Lake City Permits and Licensing Division. He and his wife Buoy came in to inquire about a property they were considering buying and its suitability for a small foundry use. These issues can be complicated and Sok's command of the English language was not stellar at that point. So he needed a little tender loving care. I was able to assist him in navigating the intricate bureaucratic pathways leading to building permits and a business license. Through this process we became friends.

I had not been intimately acquainted with a refugee family to that point. It was very enlightening to learn the amazing story of the Tann family and their realization of the "American Dream." Being a born and bred American I had always taken my citizenship and the blessings of living in this free land more or less for granted. My eyes were opened as I learned the history of this family. They epitomized the stereotypical folks who fled horror in their homeland and came here with only a "dollar in their pocket" and worked hard, made successes of themselves, and become valuable American citizens.

Sok is what he calls an "hon" man (honorable man). This is what has always attracted me to him. His word is his bond. I have watched him paying all his creditors on time even when his clients weren't always paying him on time. Many times I have seen him eat the cost of mistakes or misunderstandings to uphold his word in an agreement, verbal or written.

Sok told me early in our acquaintance that he would like me to help him "write his story" someday. Well that day came in 2013 as we began the process. It has been a privilege to assist in a project to document important events in the life of someone who has made a difference for his family, his community and his adopted nation. The United States of America is a better place for adopting Sok Tann.

Randolph Paul Taylor

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TIME LINE

1952	Birth	Sreng, Cambodia
1954	Parents divorced	Sreng
1957	Started school (age 5)	Sreng
1957	Dad moved 5 mi away	Rural village outside Sreng
1966	Learned boxing, cards, pool, scrap	Sreng
1968	Ice cream business, ducks	Sreng
1968	Traded bike for old motorcycle	Sreng
1969	Father killed by Khmer Rouge	5 mi outside Sreng
1969	Went into taxi business	Phenom Penh
1970	War started	Cambodia/Viet Nam
1970	Marriage	Phenom Penh
1970	Escaped to Phenom Penh	
1970	Lon Nol coup –Sihanouk in exile	
1971	Ken born (#1 son)	Phenom Penh
1971	Grandfather Eng Tann died	Phenom Penh
1972	Chi born (#2 son)	Phenom Penh
1973	Escaped to Nimit on west border	Cambodia
1974	Fled across the border to Thailand	Thailand
1975	War ended	Cambodia/Viet Nam
1975	Grandma died	Phenom Penh
1978	Daughter Heang was born	Somewhere in the jungle
1979	Viet Cong overran Cambodia	
1979	Entered refugee camp	Thailand
1980	Departed for the U.S.	Hong Kong, Honolulu, San Fran, SLC
1980	Started new life in America	Salt Lake City
1980	Began work at LynRus Co.	Salt Lake City
1983	Bought home	3266 S. 4355 W. West Valley City
1996	Started TSB Foundry	Salt Lake City
2004	Built home in West Valley City	4177 John Way
2006	Bought Valley Machine Co.	Salt Lake City

MY BEGINNINGS



Sok Tann – 2013

I was born on a Friday in the fourth month of the Year of the Dragon - 1952 in Sreng, Cambodia to Ohn Tann and Heng Siv. I don't know the precise date of my birth but I know it was Friday because I was named after the day of the week on which I was born. "Sok" means Friday in my native language. My country did not have a reliable system for keeping vital records so I have never had a birth certificate.



Plate 1 – Map of Cambodia

In my growing up days Sreng was a small rural village of two to three thousand people. It was located 52 km (32 mi) south of Cambodia's capitol city Phnom Penh. There were four to five hundred houses in the main village area and outlying housing clusters made up the rest. Only one person in the whole village had a transistor radio and no one even had a motorcycle.

Dad and Mother were sixteen years old when they married. My father's parents were Eng Tann and Tre Keo. I called my mother's parents Grandpa Seng and Grandma Kim.

When I lived in Sreng as a youth there was no electricity in the town. We used kerosene for our lighting. Later when electricity was available to us we only had service two or three hours a day. Our houses were made of natural materials available in the area. Rice and wheat and other crops provided stalks for making thatching. Large sheets and blocks of these thatched materials were used for building houses. These materials were only good for a few years so we were constantly repairing and replacing them. Most people were farmers, but we did have a mayor and town council.

I didn't go into the capitol city of Phenom Penh often, but when I did I rode the bus. The 32 mile ride took a half a day. The bus took a very winding route through the countryside. Riders would often be loaded down with baggage, crates of chickens, etc.

A Family Divided

My parents' immaturity and other factors intervened and they divorced when I was one-year old. What I was told by relatives was that my mother didn't like the rural small town life. She would travel back and forth often to Phenom Penh. She would stay there for some weeks and then return home for awhile and then go back to Phenom Penh. As this unwieldy situation progressed Mom and Dad decided to dissolve their marriage. The problem was what to do with me. They argued over custody and finally it was decided that I would go to Grandma and Grandpa Eng Tann and Tre Keo. Grandma was my main caretaker; she took care of me and loved me. I was basically raised by her as an only child.

My grandma and grandpa had been middle class people who had some money inherited from their parents and they owned property. So while they weren't wealthy, they did have some means. But political unrest and the conditions of the times conspired to eventually wrest their relative affluence from them. We were gradually reduced to a hand-to-mouth existence. We were poor. Our meals were very simple consisting of some rice and vegetables and a little fish. We raised chickens, but we didn't eat chicken often because we sold their meat and eggs for much needed cash. Grandma did have some rental units which gave us some income for awhile.

After my parents' divorce Dad remarried and lived next door to Grandma with his second wife. They had six children (my half brothers and sisters.) When I was five Dad relocated about 5 miles away and raised ducks. He had 1,000 birds. Duck eggs were an important part of Cambodian cuisine.

My Formal Schooling

I started school in Sreng Elementary School when I was five years old but school wasn't a very good experience for me. I kept getting held back in the 1st Grade. I attended 1st Grade for three years and I was considered to be a dumb child; one who couldn't learn. As a result I didn't have many friends and wasn't very socially accepted. I quit school at age fourteen.

My father sat me down one day and said he thought I should become a cow herder. My family had a small herd and there was always employment helping neighbors with their herds. This was considered a low class job. Poor people had little opportunity for advancement beyond subsistence living. This was my lot; I felt sorry for myself.

DOWN BUT NOT OUT

I am quite competitive and a fighter. In those early years I did a number of things to prove myself and also to earn a little money. No longer attending school my options were limited. I filled my time learning to box and playing cards and pool. I became quite a pool shark. It was hard to beat me. At our local pool hall I played competitively and the pool hall proprietor took a percentage of my pool match winnings so I didn't stay with this too long. After that I started a junk business. I would collect bottles and scrap metal and anything else I could sell. I also sold lottery tickets. Anything to make a little money.

At one point I bought some ducks from my dad and started a little duck operation of my own. With ducks the money was in the eggs. In the summer hot season there was no water for the ducks so I ended up selling them. I then began an ice cream business. I would make big batches of hand cranked ice cream and sell it. I did this for about a year; but ice cream was a seasonal business. I was 18 years old. After a time I decided to get out of ice cream so I sold the business.

At that point I traded my bicycle for an old broken down motorcycle that didn't run but I patched it together and fashioned a pull car on the back for passengers. This enabled me to go into the taxi business in my hometown of Sreng. It wasn't a great living, but it gave us a little money.

Despite my lack of formal education fate, or something, had some things in store for me that I could not foresee at the time. I had three memorable experiences that are worthy of telling in this history. As I look back on them I am amazed.

1. When I was a boy I was in the barber shop one day the barber said, "You are a very smart boy. Look at your ears, you are very lucky." The guy in the next chair piped up and said, "Let me test you." He asked me to do some arithmetic which I wasn't able to do well at all. I was smart in practical problem solving but not so much in book learning. This experience hurt my feelings and I was embarrassed.
2. At my father's funeral a Chinese man was speaking with me and surprisingly said that I would do well and would be rich someday. (This man was wealthy himself and was somewhat of a fortune teller.)
3. Later on in the Thailand refugee camp a group was sitting around one day and one of the guys said, "Well, let me guess everybody's fortune." When he came to me he said, "When you are 36 to 40 years old you are going to be rich." I was skeptical and I didn't believe him. "You wait and see", he said.

In light of these experiences it is interesting to note how my life has played out.

THE VIETNAM WAR COMES TO CAMBODIA



Plate 2 – US Bombing in Cambodia

From the time I was about 18 years old we felt the influence of the neighboring Vietnam War in my country. Communist fighters from North Vietnam (Viet Cong or VC) were starting to infiltrate Cambodia causing the war to come to us. The United States was bombing in Cambodia as well as in Vietnam causing death and destruction among the civilian population.

King Sihanouk was in exile in Beijing, China. General Lon Nol of the Cambodian Military was fighting against the Viet Cong. The Khmer Rouge (KR), a Cambodian Communist organization, was growing stronger and they were forming a coalition with the Viet Cong in opposition to Sihanouk. All of this made for a very chaotic and dangerous situation in the villages and cities of my country.

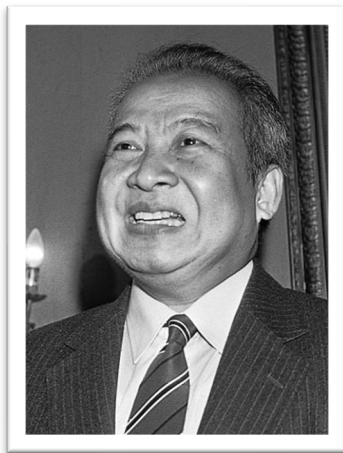
A Personal Tragedy

A severe tragedy came into my life in 1969. My father was killed by the Khmer Rouge; he was only 38 years old. I remember the night when my dad's friend came to my grandma's door and gave us the news. We immediately reported it to the police and about twenty officers, my dad's friend, and I hiked the five miles to Dad's home. We couldn't take a direct route for fear of Khmer Rouge attack and it took several hours to get there. When we arrived I saw my dad lying on the ground; it was very shocking! Years later in 1985 I asked around my dad's neighborhood about any details of his death that neighbors could give me. They told me he was killed for his gun. Dad owned a pistol which was uncommon among civilians. The Khmer Rouge knew he had a gun and they wanted it so they killed him for it. After Dad's death my grandfather Eng Tann became despondent and was never the same. Grandpa died less than two years later in 1971.

Through all of this time of quitting school and trying to pursue various business pursuits my grandma was concerned for me. She encouraged me to become a Buddhist Monk. (I'm sure she thought I would at least have a purpose in life and a little food to eat.) I didn't openly defy her, but I quietly resisted because I did not want to become a monk.

One side benefit to the war was that it was easy to get married and there were many eager young women. Perhaps not just the young women; many parents were anxious to marry off their daughters and reduce the mouths to feed and other parental responsibilities. With all of the disruption and chaos there was not much worry about dowries and the expensive trappings required of wedding families in my country. My marriage was not far off.

There was back and forth fighting throughout the region between the Viet Cong/Khmer Rouge (who were allies) and General Lon Nol's government troops. My little town of Sreng was caught in the middle of the fighting. I was intensely curious about all of this and I couldn't help but nose around to see what was going on. My curiosity put me in some pretty dicey situations at times. I went out at one point to investigate the government troops as they formed their battle lines and readied themselves for the inevitable Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge attacks. I was accosted by General Lon Nol's soldiers and they questioned me pretty severely thinking I might be a spy. They finally contacted my grandma and she apparently satisfied them and they let me go. In retrospect I was pretty foolish; human life was cheap. They could have easily just put a bullet in my head and been done with it. I must have been a great worry to my grandmother!



The Cambodian citizenry harbored ill will, even hatred, against America for their bombing and I got caught up in the fervor. In a spirit of national pride, for a short time, I wanted to join the Viet Cong and fight the Cambodian military who were trying to overthrow King Sihanouk an American ally. I remember when I was in elementary school it was in the early 1960s and the Viet Cong were starting to spill over the Cambodian border. The Americans were more aggressively helping the South Vietnamese and as the Americans started bombing in my country I was mad at them for that. I told my friend that if America bordered our country we should attack them. He saw that I was naïve and reminded me that America is a super power and that Cambodia wouldn't have a chance.

Plate 3 – Norodom Sihanouk - 1983

At one point the Viet Cong planned an attack on government troops in the Sreng area. Shortly before the attack they alerted the government troops that they were going to attack that night if the troops didn't retreat. The civilians got word of the impending attack and all but four or five families fled; grandma and I stayed. Grandma didn't want to stay, but I didn't want to go and she wouldn't leave me. We were there to witness the attack and it was impressive to my young mind. There were rockets, bombs, and field artillery guns and all manner of weapons on great display. The next morning I went out to survey the situation and found the countryside littered with dead cows and destruction was everywhere. The fighting had been very intense; the VC had burned many homes. The ones that weren't burned were set for a timed-release burning. The VC would stack a number of pillows on a sofa with a lit cigarette as the ignition source. The cigarette would burn down and eventually light the pillows on fire which would spread to the whole home. My whole town of Sreng was completely destroyed.

The people that had not totally fled the area went to a nearby Buddhist Temple to take refuge. There were about 100 people in the temple. We were forced to join them. The scene at the

temple was horrible with Lon Nol's troops shelling from 8:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon. People were hunkered down in and outside the temple; many were hit and there were broken legs and all manner of injuries and many deaths. We felt like ducks in a pond.

We stayed there two days and then moved on four miles further and stopped at the house of a friend. It was very difficult because my grandmother could not walk. I needed to get back to our old neighborhood to try to get my motorcycle so I would have some way to transport her. In our hurry to leave I had thrown it into a creek. Four or five others wanted to go back with me and see if there were any belongings they could salvage. So we snuck back to take another look. We went during the troops' dinner break when the fighting had subsided. During the fighting it was very hard to travel because of the artillery barrages and the bombing. The Viet Cong stopped us and said we couldn't go and they turned us around. At 3:00 the next morning we tried again. This time we were successful. I was amazed; where our village used to be was just a forest of charred pillars, posts and trees. I was able to retrieve my motorcycle.

At this point we were in the "Hot Zone" and it was a very dangerous area. The next morning we went another mile to a friend of my grandma and stayed there one night. Some troops stopped me again; they weren't overly aggressive until I unwisely asked them what kind of guns they had. Admittedly that was a dumb move, but I was a very curious kid. They took me back to my grandma's friends and questioned them about me. The friends and Grandma spoke up for me and the VC let me go.

We traveled two miles more and stayed there ten days. The reason for these short little hops was two-fold; my grandma couldn't travel well and the VC/KR limited movement of civilians. They wanted us to stay put. They controlled the population and needed people around. So, it was dangerous to travel anywhere. Not only did they limit movement, if you had a loose tongue you would be shot. The war had turned the friendly open Cambodian people into cowering fearful people without freedom. They turned inward. In pre-war Cambodia everyone would open their houses in the morning but the war situation made everyone hide behind closed doors. If it was discovered that you had snuck away somewhere your relatives or friends left behind would be killed. No business or commerce was conducted; everyone just laid low. It was very difficult.

The VC/KR required permits of the general populace to travel anywhere. I requested a permit to travel a short distance of about 2.5 miles and they gave it to me, but the official neglected to sign it. Along the way some troops stopped me to check my papers and noticed that my travel permit was not signed and wouldn't let me through. I had to return to the original official and get his signature.

Finally we made it to the front line of the government troops. I was pulling my grandma in the little cart on the back of my old motorcycle. When we crossed the front line and had travelled about three miles I was homesick. I had an overwhelming desire to return to our town and see it once more. I wanted to check on my coconut tree in our front yard. I left Grandma with a friend and circumvented the front line and returned to Sreng. I didn't stay long; the whole neighborhood was destroyed. I returned to Grandma and we then travelled on in the direction of the capitol city Phenom Penh.

We arrived in the suburb of Takhmao with no identification and no money. We went to a friend's house and slept and I contacted an uncle and some cousins. A cousin loaned me some money and I bought a used motorcycle which I used to get into the taxi business there. It was very dangerous. Thugs would hire a ride to some place out of town where they would kill the taxi driver and make off with his motorcycle. I got increasingly nervous, but I had to have a way to earn some money.

In Sreng and Takhmao I had some wild times giving rides to government troops. Not far from where we were staying in Takhmao was the military hot zone; a very dangerous place! Anywhere off the main roads was controlled by the Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge. My taxi business took me out into the countryside quite a bit. Any civilians who ventured into the hot zone were in serious jeopardy. The Khmer Rouge and Viet Cong would kill civilians indiscriminately throughout the area they controlled. If you were riding along on personal business and you were close enough for one of the communist troops to get a bead on you, you likely would be shot.

The Cambodian troops were very loosely organized and customary military protocol and discipline were sadly lacking. Several times I was forced by soldiers to take some of them to certain locations. These incidents could have easily cost me my life. The military personnel I was taxiing were always drunk and they would indiscriminately shoot their assault rifles as we rode along. Being drunk they would sway in the seat, yelling and cursing, and shooting at anything in sight. Several times I felt their weapons against my head. I thought my head would be blown off at any second. On one of these occasions I stopped at a little town and humored the soldier by buying him some more liquor. I convinced him we should go back and that I wouldn't tell anyone. Miraculously he agreed.

At another time, after quite a ride, we came upon a control gate with guards. The troops at the gate took the drunk soldier off my taxi and told me to "Go and don't look back!!" Thankfully both of these incidents ended with my head on my shoulders and my body still in one piece.

There was another incident when a member of the government troops demanded I take him to a bridge that their troops were protecting. It was not just him; about ten military guys jammed into my little taxi carrier. Again this guy who demanded the ride was drunk and very disorderly and was shooting his rifle at any and everything. Fortunately the troops protecting the bridge did not shoot back. As we approached the bridge one of the riders wanted me to stop. The guy behind me yelled, "Don't stop!" I didn't stop. The bridge troops launched two mortars in our direction so we stopped. During the heated interchange at the bridge the head officer there allowed me to escape. He told me to get out of there as fast as I could. He also told me to not look back.

I got myself back to where my grandmother was. It was soon thereafter that we moved into the Capitol, Phnom Penh. The telling of these experiences cannot really do justice to the terror they caused in me.

PHENOM PENH

It was 1970 and we were in Phenom Penh. For about three months I had no job and times were hard. Then a fellow came along and asked me to drive his taxi for him. After a day or two he was impressed with my driving ability and offered me a part-time job. He gave me 40% of the earnings. I did this for about one year all the while saving my money. I got a loan from a cousin and purchased a three-wheeled motorized bike I used as a taxi. I built up my clientele and became fairly successful. I drove until 1973.

My Marriage to Buoy Ly

I was married October 16, 1970 to Buoy Ly. Our meeting came about through an aunt. In Cambodia marriages are still arranged affairs. My Aunt asked me if I wanted to meet a nice girl. I said, “sure” and she took me out to see Buoy. I liked what I saw. Then Grandma and I went out to see her. After a number of these meetings between the two families, it was arranged that we would be married. Three months later we were expecting. In those three years Buoy and I had two boys; Ken and Chi. Ken was born in 1971 and Chi was born in 1972. Jobs were almost non-existent and I had a wife and two kids to support. I was a very worried young man!

Among taxi drivers there was a pecking order and I defied the order of things. A big man was recognized by all the drivers as “The Boss” and he was popular with them. The Boss and I got into a dispute over fares; he claimed that I was stealing fares (riders) from him. He tried to bully me the way he bullied all of the other drivers. This led to a fight and I whipped him. We were both taken to the police station and interrogated. While there, I wondered for awhile if things were going to go really badly for me. After hassling us for awhile the police released us and I was grateful. After the fight the bullying ended and I was respected by the other drivers. Over time things settled down and the bully and I became friends. We found that it was to our mutual benefit.

In 1970 General Lon Nol overthrew King Sihanouk and established the Khmer Republic. Sihanouk appealed to Cambodians to join the Khmer Rouge and defeat Lon Nol.¹ Phenom Penh became increasingly dangerous as the VC and KR shelled the city daily in their fighting against Lon Nol. We had been in Phenom Penh for three years but finally in 1974 it became too much for us and we decided to flee to the Thailand border. I sold my taxi. My grandma was not up the rigors of hiking through the jungle dodging enemy troops and their bullets and machetes. She remained behind with the plan that I would return for her later when it would hopefully be safer. In the next two years there was no opportunity to return and Grandma died in 1975. I owe her a great debt of gratitude. She was, in effect, my mother and loved and protected me in my youth and adolescence and I protected her when I got old enough. I lost someone very important in my life when she passed away.

¹ Ronnie Yimsut, *Facing the Khmer Rouge: A Cambodian Journey*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, & London, 2011, xxiii, timeline.

WE LEFT PHENOM PENH

In mid-1973 we were able to catch a flight and flew 300 km (186 mi) to a place called Battambang province on the western side of Cambodia where there was an airport. (Flights were cheap and I had saved some money.) Then it was another 100 km (62 mi) taxi ride to get to a little rural town called Nimit 16 kilometers from the border of Thailand. I once again tried to set up a taxi business there but it didn't work out. We scraped and scrounged to make some kind of living and have a little bit to eat. It was difficult to just survive. The first few months we lived with other families in small quarters; then I was able to scrape together some materials and build a small wood shack for our shelter. We were in Nimit until 1975 when the Viet Cong withdrew from Cambodia and the war ended in our country. In this same year Lon Nol was overthrown by the Khmer Rouge and the tyrant Pol Pot became the dictator of Cambodia. The name of the government was "Angkar." (See Appendix)

Year Zero

When the war ended everyone celebrated, but these were hard times, there was no money to do anything; we couldn't even buy food. The celebration was short-lived because Pol Pot implemented his "Year Zero or de-industrialization policies."² He emptied the cities. Everyone was sent out into the countryside to make do as best they could. Pol Pot treated his brother like everyone else; even he was forced out to the hinterlands. Pol Pot's idea was that cities were evil and that people should live in an agrarian utopia. This was crazy of course as hospitals were emptied and people told to just go and make the best of it. If you didn't obey Angkar you would die. Professional people: doctors, lawyers, white collar workers et al were all uprooted and forced to go out into the rural areas and make do working in one of many work camps. The educated elite were killed, along with hundreds of thousands of the general populace, in Pol Pot's genocidal movement. The old and very young were especially vulnerable. Many babies died in childbirth. Illness was everywhere.³ There was little water to drink. Thousands of people would descend on a lake and soon the lake would be gone. After the water was gone the mud was sucked for its moisture.

² The idea behind Year Zero is that all culture and traditions within a society must be completely destroyed or discarded and a new revolutionary culture must replace it, starting from scratch. All history of a nation or people before Year Zero is deemed largely irrelevant, as it will (as an ideal) be purged and replaced from the ground up. In Cambodia, teachers, artists, and intellectuals were especially singled out and executed during the purges accompanying Pol Pot's Year Zero. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Year_Zero_%28political_notion%29

³ "As head of the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot oversaw an unprecedented and extremely brutal attempt to remove Cambodia from the modern world and establish an agrarian utopia. While attempting to create this utopia, Pol Pot created the Cambodian Genocide, which lasted from 1975 to 1979 and caused the deaths of at least 1.5 million Cambodians out of a population of approximately 8 million." Quote from "20th Century History" *About.com*, <http://history1900s.about.com/od/people/a/Pol-Pot.html>.

Work Camps



Plate 4 – Pol Pot

We were formed into groups of 100 families. They kept us moving through the countryside from work camp to work camp. Conditions were intolerable; we were always on the verge of starvation and savage mistreatment was the norm.

At first, we tried to carry our worldly goods with us; food, treasured belongings, etc. But, slowly, we just kept getting rid of things because we could not carry them. It wasn't long until each person was down to just a spoon and an eating pot. This was our condition for three years and eight months; everyone just out in the country trying to scrounge and grow things and beg, borrow, or steal food and things to sustain ourselves. It was a horrible situation. These family groups were little communes. There were two cooks for the hundred people and they would piece together whatever they could for a meal.

Sometimes there were local banana trees with fruit on. Our cooks would often just have two or three cups of rice which obviously didn't go very far with 100 people. We ate anything that was edible and some things that were not.

Under these horrid conditions people would try to escape to the Thailand border and the Khmer Rouge government saw that they needed to move everyone farther inland to make escape more difficult. So troops put us on a train and moved us 70 miles away from the border. They enforced very strict discipline. For the most minor infraction the troops could come in and kill the whole family for the misdeed of one. Conditions were intolerable; you could not walk far at all because of the slick slimy clay mud. Mosquitoes were infuriating. We didn't have any shelter. We ate frogs and insects. You were very lucky if you caught a little fish to eat. Interestingly, there was little crime among members of these groups of 100.

With Pol Pot running the country conditions were intolerable. We were forced to work in the fields and on wood cutting details and on many other tasks designed to implement Pol Pot's dream of de-industrialization. Often these details were in areas far removed from our families and we were forced to be away from them for weeks or months at a time. One time I was sent to the border area to get some potato plants. I got within 500 feet of the border and I was very tempted to try to cross it and get away. While sorely tempted I knew that I could not leave my wife and children.

Many of the men were sent out to farming areas to plow fields. We would plow behind a cow. For the two to three months we were out there we could not return to our wives or children. The wives survived by planting crops and doing what they could to stay alive while we were away. The Khmer Rouge, on the other hand, ate well. They had everything they wanted or needed. They had meat and bread and rice and even desserts. We didn't taste any sugar for years. And for the slightest infraction they would pull the trigger and blow you away.

The Khmer Rouge moved us about 80 km (50 miles) inland again. There was nothing to eat so they sent me back into the forest to some place where I could supposedly get some rice for the group. As I was responding to this order I had an experience that in retrospect is kind of funny – although at the time I could have easily lost my life. On my journey into the forest I came upon a Buddhist Temple. As I peered in I could see many of my countrymen at long tables eating. I was so hungry that I boldly entered and joined them and I was given some food to eat. I was so focused on my eating that I didn't notice that the villagers were disappearing. Soon I was alone. I looked up to see two young women who were Khmer Rouge soldiers with their assault rifles looking down at me menacingly. They just glowered at me. I thought, "Oh Oh, I've had it now." Then I thought, "Well, if they are going to shoot me I might as well enjoy this food as long as possible." And I proceeded to eat rapidly, finishing my own food and some of the half empty bowls of the departed villagers. The young women soldiers (who were only about 16) just watched me for awhile and then left.

Two months later we were moved again about 29 km (18 miles) away and we had to walk this time. We had no shoes and it was a three day walk. Malaria was rampant and I got the disease. I was burning with fever and the outside temperature was very hot. I thought for sure I was going to die.

Hard Family Times

My wife Buoy also got very ill and several times she almost died. I was powerless to help her. Our second son Chi had dysentery and his little body could not fight it off. We had no way to get any medicine for him. I remember that he was old enough to talk and he asked us not to leave him. He held our hand as he died; we were devastated. Our daughter Heang was born out in some rural area in these trying circumstances in 1978.

Sent to Cut Trees



Plate 5 – Khmer Rouge Rebel

After months out in the fields plowing and planting crops, I was sent to the mountains to cut trees. After being away from my family for months doing farming work the last thing I wanted was to be sent away for more months of separation but I had no choice if I wanted to live. You absolutely had to do what the troops made you do. When they came to me saying that I was to be sent away again, I cried. The tree cutting project was for the purpose of burning the trees and making charcoal which would be sold. I was extremely homesick for my family. This work lasted eighteen months.

I made a friend on that duty and one day we were in camp eating and someone brought a note from the KR that the boss wanted to see him. They told him they wanted him to go home. I never saw him again. I did some discreet inquiring and eventually found out that they had killed him because he was a careless talker. The Angkar had little group sessions with us and encouraged us

to talk about our treatment and how things could be better for us. My friend made the mistake of being honest about how difficult it was to obtain any food for our families, especially when we were away from them for months at a time. His payment for honestly expressing himself was death. They beat him to death! I was very sad! When I finally got back to my family, my friend's wife kept asking me what I knew about her husband. I told her, "Please don't ask me!" This confirmed to her that he was gone. My friend had four or five children. I was deathly afraid that I would suffer the same fate. I was very careful not to say anything to anybody that would give them cause to target me.

We were always desperate for any news of what was going on. There were a few transistor radios among our group with which were able to tune into Voice of America (VOA). Detection by our captors would have certainly meant death. In 1979, we learned that the North Vietnamese Army had overrun Cambodia and Pol Pot had to run for his life to Thailand. With Pol Pot gone all of the former city dwellers, including many of my family, returned to Phenom Penh and other cities. Life there was bedlam! Landmines killed many. Such government as existed was able to give no support to citizens. Renegade Khmer Rouge rebels were still about shooting people. Life was very risky. I saw people killed every day. All of this made us decide to try for an escape to Thailand. And in the confusion and bedlam we took off.

THE TIME COMES TO MAKE A RUN FOR THAILAND

On June 12, 1979 we left Battambang Province. There was me, my wife Buoy, my son Ken, and my daughter Heang. We weren't alone; we were traveling with about 20 other family members; my mother-in-law, several cousins and others. Our family group was part of a larger group of 1,000 refugees who set out for the border. We were in the third or fourth wave of refugees. This happenstance probably saved our lives.

We carried with us as much food and other survival supplies as we could. Everyone had the same goal, ESCAPE THE COMMUNISTS! We would get up at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning and start our day of walking. We walked for days taking a circuitous route because it was too dangerous to go in a straight line. It soon became clear that we could not carry all of the goods we had brought with us so, one by one, we rid ourselves of these "necessities" to lighten our load and make walking more feasible. This, of course, meant we soon did not have the nourishment we needed and hunger and thirst were our constant companions. It took four days to get to the border and as we neared the border a problem greater than hunger and thirst arose - LAND MINES! Land mines took many lives but most of these sacrifices were made by members of the first two refugee groups. Our group was able to follow their paths through the mine fields, almost footstep by footstep, where they had cleared the way. Our group lost people but not nearly as many as the first two groups. All of the refugees in all of the groups pushed on in spite of the dangers in a quest for safety and freedom. The alternatives were too grim.

When we got across the border we were very happy; we viewed Thailand as a free country where we would be away from the dangerous situation in Cambodia and the treacherous Khmer Rouge who fought on even in Pol Pot's absence. But our happiness was tempered by difficulty. We were shaken down by bad people, even children, with knives for any goods and valuables we

had. We put up very little resistance because we did not want to bring any more trouble on ourselves now that we had escaped Pol Pot's regime. My family was very lucky; we did not lose anything. Our group just tried to gather our wits and figure out what to do next; there was no food or shelter. Adding to our misery were the heavy monsoon rains at that time. These were mean rains! Daily there was a deluge from evening until the next morning. We didn't even have a piece of plastic to protect us. We just slept on the mud. Our daughter Heang was only seven months old. Our son Ken was seven years old. As mentioned earlier, our infant son Chi had died from dysentery while on our journey.

We had brought a little bit of gold with us that Buoy's mother had given her when we got married. We had carefully saved it because she had told us to be thrifty with it; that we would need it someday. (Most Cambodian families managed to save up a little bit of gold dust; it being the only sure medium of exchange. People didn't trust any other type of money. On our travels some people did not have any gold but others shared as they could. Everyone's goal was to escape the Communists no matter what! We were all in it together.)

Shortly after our group of 1,000 refugees arrived in Thailand the Cambodian government stopped people from fleeing. We were lucky to get out before they clamped down.

The Thai officials kept us moving. We were forced to march further and further inland. By this time Buoy had just about had it. She sat down and said "I cannot go any farther." Then a little way up in front of us we heard a loud boom and were told that a lady had stepped on a landmine and had been killed. As we approached the location we could hear the wailing of her 10-year-old daughter who was inconsolable. When Buoy observed this she somehow gathered her strength and we moved on. There was nothing to dig in the soil with and all the dead lady's husband could do was cover her body with some branches.

As we were trudging along we heard the rumble of trucks coming toward us. It wasn't long before 30 large Thai government trucks pulled up. The drivers and officials told us all to get on the trucks and they would take us to a camp only about five miles away. Our group was very happy to see them and we all clamored to board the vehicles. We were jammed in like sardines. After traveling for a distance it became obvious that we were going a lot farther than five miles. They had lied to us; we were really heading back toward Cambodia. We were being returned to the impossible situation in our homeland.

When we finally stopped we saw another group of about 1,500 Cambodian refugees. We could hear them yelling at us warning us to get out of the trucks and try to get away. One of the head drivers was sympathetic, but he said he could do nothing for us. He said simply, "You must go!" "Get out of my truck and go!" We did not know where to go. We did not know what to do. One of the soldiers who was of Chinese descent tried to be somewhat helpful; he told us to just head out into the jungle but to keep right; if we kept right we would remain in Thailand. If we went left at all we would be in Cambodia again. We were so hungry and thirsty; we had had virtually nothing to eat for days. There was no road and we had no shoes.

We walked two excruciating hours and came upon a Thai farmer. He was afraid to help us for fear of government reprisals. He would not even let us sleep under any shelter; we just had to,

once again, sleep out in the fields. I noticed a few kernels of rice that someone had spilled; maybe two or three hundred pieces. I laboriously picked all of these up out of the dirt and ate them. Our group collectively scraped up some gold dust to give to the farmer. This got his attention and he helped us a bit, but we soon had to move on. We marched on and came to a small town where we stayed for three days. What misery! The rain was coming in torrents and the heat was oppressive. We found no hospitality. But, at last we were able to buy some plastic covers so at least we got a little protection from the rain.

A Glimmer of Hope from a Westerner

On the third morning in this town I woke up to an amazing sight. I looked across the way and I saw a person that looked like an American. I wanted to cry. I didn't speak any English, but those who did told me that he was there to interview the refugees. I didn't quite know what to think but I was very happy to see him. The Thailand people and soldiers were not making it very easy for him to talk to us. They pushed him around and threatened him with their guns. But he was a very brave man; he stood up to them and insisted that he be able to speak with us. He took a lot of pictures and asked us all kinds of questions about where we had come from and who we were and so on. I wish I knew who he was; he was a very brave man indeed. After so many weeks of oppression and intense fear and struggling for our lives; to see this man was a glimmer of hope.

Then, incredibly, a convoy of twenty busses started rolling into town. Officials insisted that we all get on the buses, but this time we were very wary; we didn't trust them. We tried hard to keep our families together and we resisted. They again gave us some story about taking us to another camp where we would be given food and protection. We very reluctantly got on the buses and started on a six or seven hour journey. It became clear they were taking us to Cambodia again.

Finally the buses stopped. Our group gathered up what gold dust we could and used it to pay off the soldiers so that they would not continue taking us on this tragic journey. The gold convinced them and they allowed us to stay. There was a Buddhist temple nearby and we stayed there with a large contingent of 3,000 people who were already gathered there. We were there about a week and there was trouble every day. Once again food was a huge problem; we would sneak out at night to try to go buy some food with gold, but if you were caught they persecuted you.

Then another wonderful and miraculous thing happened. Many representatives from countries of the United Nations came into the area; they were all over the place. They worked out some kind of a deal with the Thailand government. Thailand was paid to set up a refugee camp. This happened over a three month period. My family entered the camp in September of 1979. The camp was called Mairut. It had taken three months of long, arduous, and dangerous trekking to get to this refugee camp.



Plate 6 - Bangkok

We were in the camp about two months and then we were taken to Thailand's capital city of Bangkok. Bangkok was the processing center for refugees. Here you would be inoculated and prepared for your assignment to a country that had agreed to accept refugees. Most people were processed in about five days, but we were delayed. There was a problem with my mother-in-law; they would not let her go because she had tuberculosis. We were held up for two months trying to deal with this. In a family council we decided that we would go on and she would remain behind for treatment; her son would remain with her. They would try to catch up with us later. It was difficult to split up with her but we did not want to remain in Bangkok for an indefinite period and miss our precious opportunity for freedom. My wife Buoy, of course, did not want to leave her mother behind, but under the circumstances it seemed the best course. (Her mother did get treated and she ultimately joined us.)

THE UNITED STATES

Many of our countrymen applied with France which was a popular destination. We also applied with the French Embassy, but I was turned down because I had such limited education. The French Government had high education standards for the refugees they would accept. Many countries were receiving refugees, but we felt fortunate to be assigned to the United States. We were interviewed by the U.S. Embassy and they simply asked us which state in the United States we wished to go to. It seemed that the United States was taking any and all applicants; your literacy or schooling didn't enter into whether they would take you or not. U.S. authorities provided everything we needed; food, medical exams, etc. I had a hard time believing that they would actually take us to another country, especially a freedom loving one. But at last the time for departure came. We were excited and we asked them what we needed to do. They said simply to be ready by 3:00 o'clock that afternoon and a bus would pick us up. Unbelievably, right at 3:00 PM, a bus came by and all eight of us were taken to the Bangkok Airport. As I was sitting on the airplane waiting for takeoff I finally started to believe! In our group were my wife and two children, my sister-in-law and brother-in-law and their children.

The Journey

The plane took off and we had about a three hour flight to Hong Kong, China. We were bused to the city of Macau to a hotel and we slept in bunk beds with 15 people in each room. In the morning a Refugee Agent came by and took us to breakfast and after breakfast we looked around town. Hong Kong was a very impressive city. Tall buildings towered over us and there was much traffic. We walked around very humble and meek and quiet. I didn't have any shoes, just sandals. We stopped at a restaurant for lunch and they said we could order anything; we had little experience with restaurants and didn't know what to order. We were coming from a condition of eating insects, worms, snails and whatever else we could find in the jungle. So we asked them to just bring us anything, it would be great.

As we were walking around Hong Kong we noticed long double-decker buses that they operated from either end. When the bus got to a destination the driver would simply go to the opposite end of the bus and drive in the other direction. This was so they didn't have to turn the buses around on Hong Kong's narrow congested streets. We certainly had never seen buses that you could drive from either end. We were very surprised.

We were so happy to be in Hong Kong; it was just amazing to see people walking around in freedom. This is something we had not experienced in our homeland under Pol Pot. That evening they took us to the airport at 7:00 PM and we saw the largest airplane we had ever seen. We did not know there were airplanes that big. (It must've been a Boeing 747.) We took off and headed for Honolulu, Hawaii and I got airsick on the flight and vomited several times. We were all in a weakened condition from months of little food and the extreme conditions. The flight was not the most enjoyable for me.

When we arrived in Honolulu we had a three hour layover. Hong Kong and then Honolulu - talk about moving from poverty and deprivation to opulence! Then it was on to San Francisco and we arrived at 5:00 AM.

In the San Francisco International Airport I was surprised by the trams that were running handicapped and disabled people around. These were very strange to me. Our layover in San Francisco was 9 ½ hours. Refugee Agents kept coming up and asking us if we needed blankets, snacks, etc., but I couldn't understand them so I just shook my head. As we sat and laid about the airport we must have been quite a sight with sandals on our feet and "deer-in-the-headlights" looks on our faces. A few individuals came up to us and gave us quarters, especially to our children.

We had a layover in San Francisco of 9 ½ hours and then we got on a flight direct to Salt Lake City, Utah. It was January 5, 1980. Ken was now 8 years old. We arrived in Salt Lake at 4:00 in the afternoon. As we were flying into the Salt Lake Valley we observed a sight we had never seen before; everything was white and there were few trees. This surprised us greatly; we had never seen snow before and where we came from trees were plentiful. They taxied the plane to a place on the tarmac away from the terminals and we walked to a nearby building.

BEGINNING A NEW LIFE

Inside the building sponsor families were waiting. Our sponsors were John and Anne Pos.

They recognized us by our family refugee number which was T-32700. After all these years I still remember that number. John and Anne greeted us warmly and we were soon taken to The



John & Anne Pos

First Christian Reformed Church on the NE corner of 800 E 900 S in Salt Lake City. This was the church of our sponsors, the Pos family. The Church Pastor's name was Jim; he and others greeted us and they took our family to a home right next door to the east (805 E 900 S). It served as temporary quarters for refugee families as they came in. It was a great roof over our heads, especially considering where we had come from sleeping in jungles with no shelter. We had never seen floor carpeting before. We stayed here four months.

I remember well the little 90-year-old lady that lived in the house east of us. She sat on her porch sewing every day. I had very little English ability at that time, so it was difficult to communicate with her, but somehow we became friendly with each other. She never seemed to have any family come to visit her. I was saddened at her passing to see her family come and divide up her worldly goods.

John Pos worked for the LynRus Company, a large foundry in the city, and he got me a job there. At first I cleaned castings and swept the floor and did any other job they had for me. I started at \$4.00 dollars per hour but it was only a week and they came to me through an interpreter and said that I was being raised to 4.50 per hour because I was a hard worker. I remember my first paycheck very well, it was \$105. I did not know what to do with the check; my country was a cash-based society and I wasn't aware of checks. But, John Pos took me to Zion's Bank and helped me set up an account. I learned how to cash my checks and make deposits. This first paycheck made me so happy and proud; back in Cambodia that \$105 would have been a fortune.



Refugee Shelter Home Next to Church

John Pos picked me up every morning for work and brought me home. John and Anne were gracious and an invaluable aid to us in getting settled and acclimating to this totally foreign environment and culture. They set up doctor appointments for us and transported us to them.

(When we arrived in America my wife Buoy was pregnant with Patricia so there were plenty of doctor appointments.) They taught us how to live as citizens in the United States.

Notwithstanding John Pos's kindness in getting me a job; in those early years I was envious of some of my friends and relatives and the companies they worked for. Their working conditions seemed to be much better. I tried to apply at other companies but the application process was difficult for me and I never received an invitation for an interview. I ended up staying at the LynRus Company for sixteen years and became expert in aluminum sand casting.

In addition to working at LynRus Foundry I worked nights and weekends at odd jobs. I would break out concrete or do anything I could find. Anything to get a little money and try to get ahead.

Early on some acquaintances asked me why I didn't go to California and get on the government welfare rolls. There were also refugee programs for schooling. They didn't know me well, I guess. I am one to be self reliant and pay my own way. I just wanted opportunities to show what I could do with my own sweat and initiative. It no doubt goes back to my childhood schooling experience. I wasn't a good student then and schooling didn't appeal much to me here either. But, I have tenacity and a real handle on practical knowledge. So I stayed in Salt Lake City and through diligence and hard work positive things started to happen.

While Buoy was pregnant with our fourth child Patricia she started working at Dee's Restaurant on North Temple as a dishwasher. Her shift was 4:00 PM to 2:00 AM. I would take her to work and pick her up. She made \$3.10 an hour and worked really hard. After seven months she quit that job and began to do seamstress work at a clothing factory where she stayed for eleven years. We learned that, compared to Cambodia, life in the United States was not that difficult if you are willing to work hard. In Cambodia you could work very hard and still not have enough to buy even a minimum amount of food for your family to eat.

We Rented Our Own Place

After about two months we were required to move from the temporary refugee house and rent something of our own. Our first rental was a one bedroom basement apartment. at 919 South Wilson St. in Salt Lake City; the rent was \$185 a month. The rent included gas and electricity. We lived there one and a half years. From there we moved to 500 S 500 E and the rent was \$240 a month. (It has since been demolished for the large Smith's Food King Store that is there now.) We lived there until 1983. There was a Safeway Store only about 300 feet away. For \$20 we could buy a basket full of groceries and it seemed like we were in food heaven.



919 Wilson

Finally Got Some Wheels

In 1980, after six or seven months being in our new country we were able to save \$2000. We needed a car. I passed my driver's test after only about one month in the United States. It did not seem too difficult as soon as I learned the traffic laws. I had a lot driving experience. The first car I bought was an old '78 Volkswagen Dasher. I paid \$2,300 for it. I took \$1,000 out of our savings and I borrowed the other \$1,300 from the bank. The loan was for 18 months and the monthly payment was \$86 a month.

I had wanted to buy a new car but Ann Pos talked me out of it, she said we couldn't afford a new car yet. I don't know if it was a good decision because the old Volkswagen was nothing but trouble. It required constant repairs. I remember the idle setting in the carburetor didn't work. That made for interesting stops at lights, etc. After nursing the Dasher along for quite awhile, I finally had a dealership fix it. I drove the car for about six years to its last dying breath.

The day came that we decided we could buy a new car. We went to a car dealership on 9000 S. in Sandy, Utah. It was one of many interesting experiences I had as a new citizen in this new land. At the dealership no one came out on the lot to help me so I went inside and found someone. My English was not good and I said, "I want to change my car." I had my old Volkswagen as a trade-in and I said, "How many you pay me?" The salesman said, "I will give you \$4,000 for your old Volkswagen." I thought this was quite surprising since I'd paid \$2,300 for it six years before. Then I asked him how much for the new Oldsmobile sedan that I was looking at. He said \$20,000. I knew that they were really only about \$12,000 because a friend of mine had recently bought one. I humored the salesman for a few minutes and left.

At another dealership I was looking at a car and it did not have a rear window defroster. I quizzed the salesman about it and he told me I didn't need a defroster because it didn't freeze or snow in Utah. I left and drove my Volkswagen for another year or two and then bought a brand-new Subaru in 1984 for \$12,000. It was so nice to have a reliable car that did not break down all the time.

Our First Purchased Home

Finally were able to buy our own home. In 1983 we bought a home in West Valley City at 3266 S. 4355 W.



3266 S 4355 W – West Valley City

A Funny Experience

I hadn't been in the country very long and I was on my way to work at the LynRus Foundry one morning. It was 6:00 A.M. I was stopped at a stoplight in front of Little America Hotel and a guy in a suit carrying a briefcase was in the crosswalk in front of me. He looked like a salesman. He walked right over to my passenger side door and got in the car. I didn't know what to think; I was afraid of him. He didn't say anything at first but at the turn of the light we took off and he started giving me various commands to turn here and turn there. After several of these directional maneuvers he asked me to stop and he got out without so much as a "thank you." I was new in the country so I didn't know if this was customary in America or not. I think about this incident from time to time and it always brings a smile to my face.

We Built a New Home



Our home built in West Valley City – 2004

In 2004 we were able to build a nice home in West Valley City at 4177 John Way which is where we live today (2014). My wife Buoy made many nice design modifications to the house plans which have made our home very comfortable to live in.

Gradually Bettering Ourselves

We have never been sorry we came to America. We are very happy with our life here and proud of our accomplishments. As of this writing we have been in the United States longer than we were in Cambodia. We have lived here now 34 years. Ken, Heang, & Patricia don't know Cambodia; they only know America.

During the economic downturn of the 1980s I felt we might want to start buying some real estate. The home right next door to us at 3284 South 4355 West was for sale. We put \$4,000 down and bought it. After that we bought a duplex and then a four-plex. These were the first of many properties we eventually acquired. At this writing we own nine houses and eleven duplexes. For a time we leased an eatery in the Orem Mall Food Court called “The Sandwich Loft.” Being a landlord and maintaining properties is not easy, but this allowed us to better ourselves. Nothing like this would have been possible for us in Cambodia.

TSB Foundry



TSB Foundry – 736 W 1390 S – Salt Lake City

My friends laughed at me but I had been dreaming of being self employed for some time. After working sixteen years for the LynRus Company, I had an opportunity to buy the sand casting part of their business. In 1996 I made the purchase with the idea of starting up a foundry of my own. After a lot of searching I located a property at 736 West 1390 South. My wife and I went to the Permits and Licensing Division of Salt Lake City and inquired about the permissibility of establishing a sand casting foundry at this location. We met Mr. Randy Taylor, supervisor of Permits and Licensing, and he helped us through the many bureaucratic steps required. In October of 1996 we opened the doors of “TSB Foundry.”

I knew starting up any new business would be a challenge, and I was ready for the challenge, but 18-hour days really wore on me after awhile. I didn’t take care of my health as well as I should have. During the start-up phase of the business I lost 30 pounds but gradually we got things on a solid footing and it is still going strong at this writing. I retired from the day-to-day operations and turned it over to my daughter Heang and her husband Kim in 2012.

Valley Machine

In 2006 the owner of Valley Machine, my business neighbor to the north of TSB, came to me and asked me to buy his business as he had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. We didn't know much about the machine shop business, but we considered the matter and decided to do it. We were able to keep all of Valley's critical employees which enabled us to keep the business going while we learned the ropes. We have updated the shop by purchasing much state-of-the-art equipment and I installed my son-in-law, Ty Srey (Trisha's husband), as the manager.



Valley Machine – 735 W 1355 S – Salt Lake City

CONCLUSION

For the most part Americans are good kind people who love freedom. Most of them have not had the experience I have had though and none of them love it more than I do. Here, if you pay your taxes and obey the laws, people and government officials leave you alone. What a blessing! It has been a good life here in the United States and I look forward to many more good years as my life progresses. My family has been very blessed.

ILLUSTRATION & PHOTO CREDITS

Plate 1 – “Map of Cambodia” <http://mudahnyageo.blogspot.com/2011/10/bentuk-muka-bumi-cuaca-dan-iklim.html>.

Plate 2 – “US Bombing in Cambodia” (Photo in the Public Domain), *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:B-52D%28061127-F-1234S-017%29.jpg>.

Plate 3 – Arkesteijn, Jan. “King Sihanouk.” *Wikipedia Images (Under a Creative Commons License)*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Norodom_Sihanouk_%281983%29.jpg.

Plate 4 – *Pol Pot*. 1978. *Facing the Khmer Rouge: A Cambodian Journey*, by Ronnie Yimsut, Rutgers University Press, 2011, xxiii.
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Plate 5 – Froehder, Christoph. “Khmer Rouge Rebel.” *Associated Press*, <http://worsethanwar.facinghistory.org/content/session-2-genocide-and-eliminationism>.

Plate 6 – *Old Bangkok*. *Flickr*, under a Creative Commons license, www.flickr.com/photos/learnthai/8328855184.

Plate 7 – Phy, Chan Than. “Angkar.” *Legacy Project*, 1999, <http://www.legacy-project.org/index.php?page=legal>.

APPENDIX

Plate 7

Angkar



Artist: [Phy Chan Than](#)

Date: 1999

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 200 x 150 cm

Event: [Cambodian Killing Fields](#)

Motif: [Violence](#)

"Angkar" is the name used to refer to the organization which was said to make all the official decisions during the Pol Pot regime. Even Pol Pot himself explained his actions by saying that Angkar had ordered them. Phy Chan Than describes Angkar as "a picture of the god which people during the Pol Pot era lived in feared awe of." Angkar was the person who "held the handles of the machine of the regime" and "sucked the strength of the people" in order to "build the power of the regime." No single person actually held the position of Angkar, and it was more a mythical entity imbued with enormous, divisive strength. Phy Chan Than paints Angkar seated like a god; huge wings are attached to its body since Angkar was always waiting "like a vampire" to catch people up for the slightest mistake. The hands of Angkar hold farm implements (a shovel, a stick, a knife, an axe), which are usually used to tend the soil and to grow things. During the Pol Pot regime, however, these tools became the preferred tools for mass murder. As Phy Chan Than explains it, "if Angkar says that you live, you live. If Angkar says that you die, you die. In that regime there was only a mouth and whatever it said was just." The tongue of the mouth curves down to suck the blood and strength of the people found below. Below the throne of the Angkar surges a sea of the blood and tears of the Khmer people.

– [Ingrid Muan](#)

<http://www.legacy-project.org/index.php?page=about>