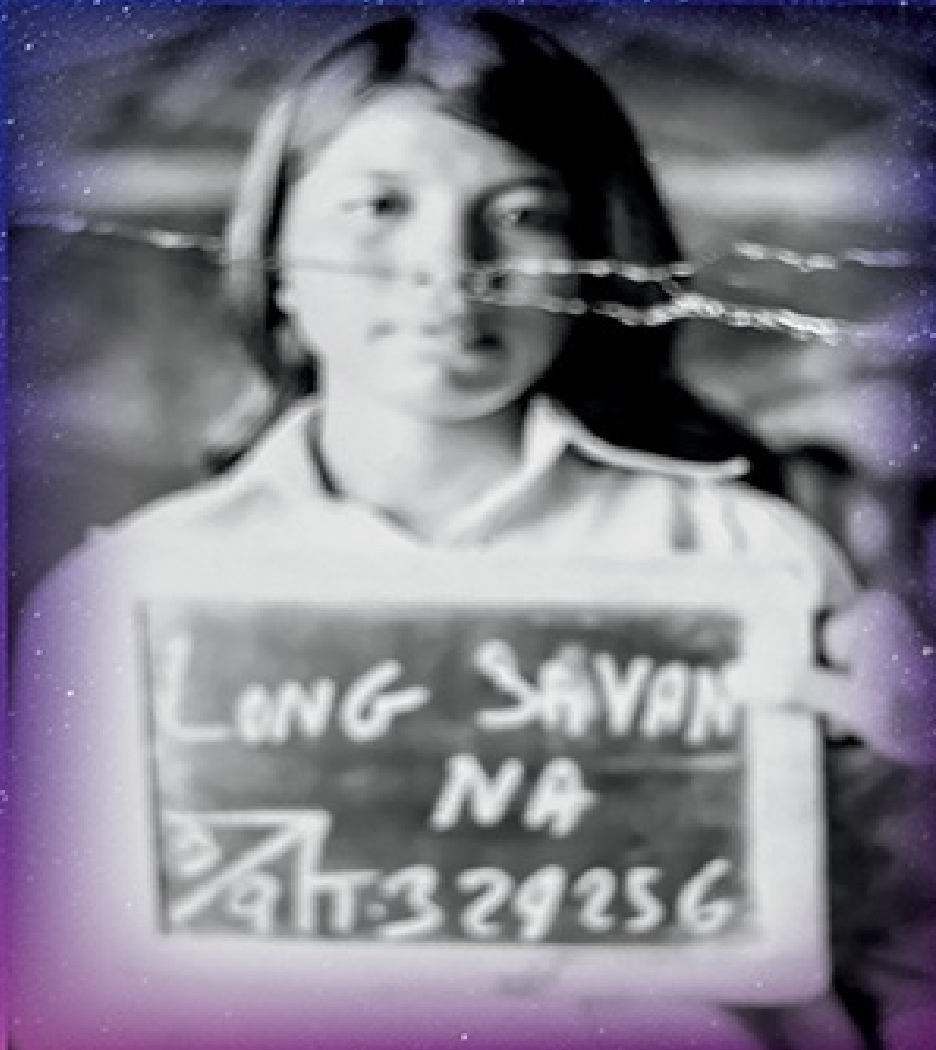


Little Srey Mao:
A Story of Survival



By

Savanna Long

As told to

Janet Alexander

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*This book is dedicated to my sweet sister Polly.
I miss you and will cherish your memory forever.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

For many years, I had been saying that “one day” I was going to write a book about my childhood. I even started writing it once, but realized it was harder than I expected. I talked about it to my good friend Janet Alexander, who I met way back in 1988 when she started working with me at Sonoma Valley Hospital. After she retired from her nursing career, she approached me about getting started on the book. She told me that she would help me, and she seemed to have a sense of urgency about it—that if we were going to do it, now was the time. And so we got started on this huge project. We met for hours almost every Saturday for nearly a year. We discussed what I had written—and what I hadn’t written—and she kept pressing me for more details. Little by little, the part of my brain where I had stored so many memories opened up and spilled out. Together, we got it all documented into our previously blank notebooks. As painful as parts of it were, I needed to get it all out. Our meetings were very emotional. I am forever grateful to Janet for listening to me talk for hours and hours about every single thing I could remember. As I relived my youth with her in the safety of our little town library, our friendship bond grew even stronger. Without her help, I never would have been able to accomplish this. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you, Janet. I also vow to keep supplying you with your favorite cookies.

INTRODUCTION

There was a war, and I survived it. Horrific and beyond imagination. Why would I want to relive it all over again by writing it down? Well, I have been blessed with two beautiful daughters, and one of my primary purposes has been to document it for you, Justina and Alexis. It is important to me for you to know about it. I do not want you to forget about your roots. I want you to know about your relatives. I want to keep parts of Cambodian culture alive here in this country, and I want you to be proud of it. It is not my goal to make you permanently sad, but rather, for you to know what I experienced. Life experiences contribute in a major way to making people who they are, and it is important to me, dear daughters, for you to know and understand me better. After reading this, you will probably agree that one of the few commonalities between growing up here and growing up in Cambodia is the strength of the love parents have for their children, and their determination to do everything they can to keep them safe, and to provide them with the best opportunities possible.

It is also very important to note that as many as three MILLION people needlessly lost their lives as a result of this conflict. As a survivor, I feel a sense of obligation to document this, in the hope that they will be remembered.



ORIGINS

My name is Savanna Long, and I am the third of nine children born to Ton Long and Than Kang.

The essence of Dad

My dad's father died when he was very young. He was the oldest of four children and his mother could not afford to keep him at home, so she sent him to be raised by Buddhist monks. From the age of five, he would begin every morning by chanting the five precepts, which is the code of ethics that prohibits killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and the use of alcohol or drugs. Twice daily he would chant in front of a statue of the Buddha with incense burning. He became a Buddhist monk himself, when he was old enough.

In addition to my father's religious studies, he helped the monks with various chores, including going around the neighborhood to ask for food, since monks didn't cook. The monks also fulfilled his mother's instructions to give him an education. Not all of the other children there were serious students, so they didn't get much of an education, but the monks noted Ton's determination and taught him well. After graduating from his basic schooling, he left the monkhood to start teaching

elementary school.

A small part of Mom

Girls were forbidden to go to school when my mom was growing up, so even though she was very smart, she received no formal education.

Her marriage was arranged, as was customary. One of my mom's uncles knew Ton, and her family decided that's who she would wed. She was considered lucky, because it was prestigious to marry an educated man.

My mother gave birth regularly every two years, except for the time when only one year separated the births. Birth order of my three sisters and five brothers from oldest to youngest was Thavy, Polly, me, Vibol, Sopheak, Chantom, Sokhomol, Rotona and Kosal.

Me

I was born on December 22, 1962, in Tram Khna, which is about 22 miles from Vietnam.

In addition to being called by my given name, I had to endure several nicknames. I'm sure you won't be surprised to hear that having dark skin was considered a bad thing back then, and also that this stigma persists to this very day. (Cambodians with dark skin who have the resources put lots of effort into trying to bleach it!) Anyway, if you are guessing that I was born a little dark baby, yes, you are correct. I was the only child to inherit my father's dark skin, and my older sisters called me "Kmao," which means black skin, and told me I was an ugly child who came from cow poop. My mother liked to call me Srey Mao, which was meant to be an endearing term, but that name also emphasized my

dark skin. I don't want to make too big of a deal out of it, but this did make me feel different, and sometimes I even felt like I wasn't really part of the family. I know that teasing is normal, even among family members who love you, but being called those names undoubtedly contributed to my sense of low self-esteem. I do think, though, that it somehow also made me tougher, and helped me to survive the many challenges I would soon start to experience.



TONG TIN

Do you need a loan, or just want to make a little money from interest? Play Tong Tin! It has been around a very long time, and Cambodians who have lost faith in banks for reasons like low interest rates, requiring too much collateral, or the possibility that the bank may close, still engage in it. Bear with me, and I'll do my best to explain how to “play” it. Essentially, a group of people get together, and those who are in need of a loan all secretly submit bids of how much interest they are willing to pay for it. The person bidding the highest interest wins. Each member gives their share of the money to the person they have chosen as the leader, who then gives it to the borrower. The borrower then gradually pays back all the money, plus the interest, to the leader. When all the money has been paid back, the leader distributes it to all the players. The borrower is called “dead” and cannot request another loan until everyone else has had a chance.

This scheme is not without risks, though. What if the borrower takes the money and runs, or doesn't pay the money back for other reasons? The leader is held responsible for paying all the money back, so it is important to choose a leader who has a regular income stream. What if the borrower does pay the money back, but the leader takes off with

it? That's another reason to pick someone who is respected, trusted, and has a stable lifestyle. Sounds like my mom and, yes, she was the chosen one. You may be wondering why I am bringing up this topic now, but I think it may have had great bearing on what happens next in my story...



BIG, BEAUTIFUL HOUSE

I suspect, but am not certain, that our house came about as a result of my mother—who was considered the financial brain of the family—“playing” Tong Tin. We were lower middle class, so how else could we have ended up with this big, beautiful house? The government paid a meager salary to teachers, and a stipend for children, but it wasn’t enough to make a decent living.

Mom designed the house. It was elevated on a wood platform. The kitchen was in a separate building, which was considered normal. The bathroom was also detached from the house. We had two ponds and a backyard that was big enough for a garden. Mango trees flanked the driveway that led out to the “freeway” in front of our house. It was the main road to Phnom Penh and had originally been paved, but it was not well maintained, so it was gradually getting worn down, and quick fixes of gravel made it quite bumpy. We saw a few cars go by, but most traffic consisted of motorcycles and tuk-tuks in the form of motorcycles pulling open carts used to transport as many as eight or nine people at a time (or even more, if you were really determined).

We had the largest house in the neighborhood, which signified prestige and gave the impression that we, as the owners, belonged to the

upper class. Our house didn't look upper-class on the inside, though. Our furnishings were modest, and it was filled up with lots of people. In addition to our immediate family, Mom's sister and Dad's mother lived there. My parents also rented one room to a professor and his wife. It was common for people with even modest incomes to employ a maid, and a distant relative who worked for us also lived there, but not right in the main area of the house, since maids were accorded a lower status.

Our neighbors all had smaller homes, but they had big plots of land with many tropical fruit trees, like orange, mango, and guava. My siblings and I would sometimes sneak over to gather fruit that had fallen from the trees. One time Vibol, Polly, and I got caught picking up the oranges that had fallen from the tree of our neighbors who lived behind us. They were angry and told our parents. We were reprimanded with the threat that they would put us in prison if we ever did it again. I believed them and was SO scared.



EARLIEST MEMORIES

I don't remember much before moving into our big, beautiful house at the age of five, but many memories—perhaps too many—remain vivid from that time on.

Too young for school

I wasn't quite old enough to start school, but my mother had her hands full with my younger siblings, so I accompanied my father on the long bike ride to school. I sat on the bar in front of him, and my two sisters sat behind him as we endured the roughly hour-long bumpy ride on the dusty, gravel roads. I was shy and quiet, and felt anxious about being separated from my family, so I followed my sister Polly to her class. She whispered, "You can't follow me," and guided me to our dad's third grade classroom. I became even more anxious when I saw him hit his students on the palms of their hands with a ruler, or give them a swat on the back with a stick when they gave an incorrect answer. This was considered normal discipline for students, and it was quite effective in getting them to pay attention. His students could sense his caring, and this did not detract in the least from the affection they had for him. (At home if we misbehaved, we would get a pinch on the hip or a stern stare.

I want to be sure to emphasize that my father loved us deeply, but obedience was important.) He would never really hurt anyone.

The children all referred to my dad as “Teacher.” It would have been considered disrespectful to call him Mr. Long. Teachers were highly respected, so teachers’ kids were also awarded special status. At recess the other children would try to coax me to “Come play with ME!” They gave me candy and shared their snacks with me. My mother hardly ever gave us money for snacks, so this was something I especially enjoyed.

School

I entered 12th grade at age six. (Grades are reversed in Cambodia, so you start in 12th grade and work your way down.) I learned to trace the alphabet and spell simple words. The next school year focused on basic arithmetic, spelling, and reading. I had a head start on the other students, because I had already learned simple addition while sitting in on my father’s class at age five.

We started each school day at 8:30 by singing the Pledge of Allegiance with our hand over our heart while two students hoisted the flag to the top of the flagpole. Class went from nine until noon. Students went home for lunch until two o’clock (but I ate at school, because I lived too far away to go home), and then it was back to class until five p.m. During recess, students who had money bought snacks. We jumped rope and played games, such as hopscotch and hide and seek. Some school sports we had were volleyball, soccer, running, jumping, and badminton, but I was too young to participate.

Vaccination time

I remember standing in a long line with several hundred other students to get our immunizations. There were only a few nurses and a few needles to vaccinate all of us. I noticed that they used the same needles over and over, just cleaning them by dipping them in steaming hot water and wiping them off with white cloths before drawing up the next dose. Some of the children were crying, but I was stoic, because I knew it was necessary. The injection sites became swollen and painful, and I still have ugly scars on my arm and leg from those shots.

Ming Thoeng

My Aunt (“Ming”) Thoeng had lived with my parents when she was young and was about twenty when she moved into this house with us. She was a talented seamstress, and my mother opened a shop for her in town. Women would drop off beautiful silk fabric and lace to be made into fashionable clothing, but they often couldn’t afford to pick it up when it was finished, so my mother had my aunt alter the clothes to fit her, and she ended up with literally hundreds of colorful outfits. My mother loved to dress up and looked so beautiful when she would put on those clothes and her sunglasses. She sure turned a lot of heads. Men who didn’t know her thought she was a nanny, and not already a mother of six children.

Men would also bring cloth for my aunt to make them shirts. Several of her customers wanted to marry her, but she chose a man who had a high position in his career. He also happened to be very good looking, but who cares about that, right? They had a beautiful wedding at our house. My younger sister Sopheak was very attached to my aunt, and when they were moving far away to the province of Steung Treng, she cried and put up such a fuss that they took her with them as far as

Phnom Penh and dropped her off with relatives there. My parents went and picked her up.

Pou Roun

When Uncle (“Pou”) Roun would come to visit, he always looked for me to give me a big hug. I was his favorite, but I was shy and afraid since I didn’t think I belonged to the family, so I ran away from him as soon as I heard his voice.

Whatever you do, do not wake up Dad

Sometimes Dad would need to take a nap during the day, and if we woke him up, he would be furious. Sopheak remembers accidentally waking him up when she was about five. She doesn’t remember how, but she may have stepped on a creaky board on the floor. He jumped up and started chasing her. She ran outside as fast as she could, running down a narrow path between two ponds. Dad fell into one of the ponds and Sopheak started laughing her head off. Guess what Dad did? He gave up.

Our pet

One day our parents brought home a small white poodle named Sous. We weren’t sure what the name meant, but we knew it was some kind of military name. People didn’t have cats for pets, but there were plenty of wild ones who would come and steal fish we had roasting outside.

Market

Mom went to the market almost every day because we didn’t have a

refrigerator. When we were home on the weekends, we eagerly waited for her to get home from the store with treats for us. It didn't take more than a couple of disappointments to realize that we would rarely be presented with a treat. Money was tight.

Drafted

My father was drafted into the army when we lived at this house, but since he was a teacher, he did not have to give up his job. Sometimes he was required to guard the nearby military base at night, though.

I remember a pond near the base, and when soldiers threw grenades in the pond to kill the fish, my siblings and I would run over and collect fish, too.

Witch tree

A couple houses away from us was the witch tree. We would sometimes see—or maybe it was just our imaginations—shooting lights come down and disappear into the tree. We thought it was a witch and were scared to death. The light we thought we saw could also be an angel coming down from heaven. People would burn incense, leave offerings of bananas at the base of the tree, and pray for peace and safety. Recently my husband and I were driving home from somewhere and he looked up and suddenly said, “Did you just see that light in the sky?” Those same feelings of fear I had as a child immediately re-awakened in my body.

CHANGING TIMES

When the stars came out at night and the adults saw one with a tail, they seemed to sense that something was going on. They said that meant our country was going to have a war. If we kids had already gone to bed, they would get us up to show us the star with the tail. I have this memory as far back as I can remember, even before the fighting started.

When the war started in 1970, Dad would hear reports of the Khmer Rouge advancing as they overtook villages. Most of the information we got was from limited radio reports and by word of mouth, since we had no TV to keep us informed and advise us what we should do. Sometimes, too, we would see something dropping from planes as they flew over. They were little pieces of paper that fluttered down and ended up scattered throughout the fields. We ran around and picked them up. They were little notes that gave us bits of news about what was going on.

The Khmer Rouge attacked and took over small villages first. When we heard shooting off in the distance, we knew they were getting closer. One of our neighbors who was in the military went to a nearby village to fight. He didn't return for quite some time, and then we saw his dead body being brought home in an open casket. He had already

been dead for a while, and the smell was really sickening. All of us kids were forced to go over and pay our last respects. It was so scary. A platform was built in front of the house and the casket was put on top, and then they lit a fire to cremate him. Monks chanted, and eerie music was amplified through speakers. It went on all night. Afterwards, the family gathered the ashes and put them in an urn on the mantle. It was right by the swimming pond where all of us kids used to love to go to swim. We were scared to swim there after that. We would soon start to hear that haunting kind of music more frequently, and we knew that meant someone had died.

It took an hour or two by tuk-tuk to get to the village where my grandparents lived. With the war now going on, we would go back and forth as things flared up and then calmed down. The missile launcher was nearby, and every time we heard it my heart started pounding, and I knew we were going to have to run and hide. Mom would quickly gather us all up, and we ran to our hiding place underground. It was a huge hole resembling a burial plot that was covered with plywood, a tarp, and then dirt on top. There was a small space left for us to crawl down into the hole. My grandfather told us to sprinkle soil on our heads and to keep repeating something like “Potour Poutingus Poutusvior papung vinasonte ussesatour.” He said it was a Buddhist prayer, and that it meant for the wind to blow away every obstacle and evil that was coming to us.

TIME TO MOVE

When we heard the shooting getting closer, my parents told us it was time to move. That was the beginning of many moves. Every time we heard that a village close to us had been invaded, we knew we would be next. We almost never all left together. Mom went ahead with my younger siblings first. Dad and the rest of us kids would follow shortly after. Initially, we relocated to the capital city of Phnom Penh. We were glad not to hear fighting there. We were able to stay with some aunts for about a week and then went to stay at another aunt and uncle's house. I remember sitting at the table eating dinner, and my uncle suddenly threw a porcelain plate across the table, shattering it into pieces. My whole family immediately got up and filed out of the house like a row of ducks into the dark, rainy, muddy night. We walked for about a half hour before finding an apartment complex that rented rooms, and we were able to spend the night there. We washed our muddy clothes outside, and then Mom tucked us into bed. Our bed was a straw mat on the floor. I was too young to understand my uncle's behavior, and felt so sad. I know now that they didn't have the room or the resources to take in a family of eight.

After that, my parents found a small one-bedroom apartment to rent

in the outskirts of Phnom Penh, in an area called Chong Kneas. We had our own kitchen, but shared a bathroom. I started my third year of school there at Sala Sonthormok. This school was very large compared to the school in the small town where my dad used to teach. Even though I was shy and felt intimidated by the hugeness of this school, I made friends very quickly. We wore uniforms consisting of a white shirt, blue skirts for girls, and blue pants for boys. Oh, and flip flops, of course! We only had one uniform each. If it had been washed and wasn't dry by morning, we weren't allowed to go to school.

One day my mom brought my brother, Sokhomol, home from the hospital. We were very happy that we had another baby to play with.

Our apartment was right by the main freeway that went between downtown and the international airport, so it was noisy, and the four lanes were full of cars, motorcycles, and several varieties of tuk-tuks. One weekend Mom asked Polly to go across the freeway to gather up young tamarind leaves for cooking. Polly had a small basket and asked me to come along. I told her that I didn't want to go, and she said if I didn't go that she wouldn't go. She kept nagging me until I got really angry, grabbed the basket out of her hands, told her that I would just go by myself, and took off. While crossing the second of four lanes, a motorcycle didn't see me and ran right into me. The next thing I knew, I woke up in the hospital with Mom at my bedside. I had lots of stitches on the left side of my face. My parents couldn't afford for me to stay in the hospital, so I was sent home the same day to recover, and had the stitches removed at a clinic near our apartment several weeks later. The man who hit me was very upset and visited me at home to be sure I was going to be okay. Mom was beside herself and blamed Polly for me getting hit, saying she shouldn't have let me go by myself.



BATTAMBANG

My dad continued to be paid a small salary from the government even though he wasn't able to find a job here, so after about a year, we moved to another big city, Battambang, which is close to the border of Thailand. We went in a van that was used for public transportation, and there was only room for us to take a few belongings, so we arrived there with very little. I had a couple of aunts there who were married to railroad workers, and since the trains were not currently running, we were able to live in an old, abandoned train car parked on the tracks in front of their home for few months. My siblings and I were able to sleep deeply here, so we didn't feel the mice chewing off the dead skin on our fingertips at night. We noticed that the skin was peeling, but it took us a long time to figure out why.

Dad still didn't have a job, so even though I was only nine years old, my mother would make my sister and me get up very early in the morning to go to the wholesale market to buy cookies made of colored dough and stuffed with sugar and coconut to re-sell at our smaller, local market. Sometimes my aunt would get me up at the crack of dawn to go with her to buy morning glories at the wholesale market to re-sell, since people liked to use them in cooking. We also tried to make money by

selling French bread. Vibol and I would walk through residential areas early in the morning yelling out, “French bread, French bread! Hot and crispy! Buy mine!” Sometimes they would buy, and other times they would say, “Go away. It’s not like you said.” We didn’t always make a profit.

OUR LIFE IN MOUNG

Dad heard about a teaching job ten or so miles away in Moug, so we moved there and had about three years of an almost normal life. It felt good just getting to sleep in on the weekends until crowing roosters woke us. We lived in an apartment complex surrounded by banana trees, where most of our neighbors were teachers with children. We didn't have any dolls, no real toys or television, but still had lots of fun playing hide and seek and other games with our new friends. We didn't have the popular board game mancala, so we improvised by digging ten little holes in the ground. We divided up the few marbles we had and tried to "capture" each other's marbles. We also enjoyed "by loc by law," a make-believe game where we would buy and sell imaginary things using leaves for money.

We started back to a school that we could walk to in town. Dad's teaching job was on the outskirts of town, so he had a long bike ride to get there. He would often bring home gifts of fruit and fish from his students.

My brother Rona was born when we lived here.

Celebrations

Some of our happiest times in Moug were the holidays. Cambodian New Year was the biggest. We always looked forward to this holiday with so much anticipation and excitement. Chinese New Year was also about the same time, and there were many Chinese living in Cambodia, so there were lots of festivities. We had a whole week off school, and when the celebration started, it went on almost non-stop for three days. There wasn't much drinking by the adults; alcohol was expensive.

My dad brought home gifts of food from his students, and we also spent lots of time preparing delicious dishes that we would share with the Buddhist monks, friends, and family. Oh, how my mouth waters just thinking about all the yummy food! We always had some kind of curry, usually made with chicken, that we ate with steamed rice. A side dish was chaa masou, a type of stir-fried noodle, that we only made on special holidays.

For dessert, we had noum bot and noum koum (“noum” refers to a snack or treat), each folded in a different way so we kids could tell the difference when making the difficult decision of which one we were going to choose. Sticky rice flour was prepared by soaking overnight, grinding by hand, draining in a cloth, and then steaming.

To make noum bot: Combine the rice flour, mashed mung beans, salt, pepper, and a pinch of sugar. Roll a portion into a ball, place in center of banana leaf, flatten, and pull up sides of banana leaf to close. Steam for several hours.

To make noum koum: Combine shredded coconut, sesame seeds, and brown sugar. Wrap in rice flour. Drop into corner of banana leaf and fold into a triangular shape. Steam.

There was much more than food that was associated with these

special holidays. My parents gave us money and we were allowed to play the gambling game Kla Klook. We loved placing bets and rolling the three six-sided dice, each side painted with an animal. We also played many games at the temple, including tug-of-war, believe it or not! Movies were shown outside on a big screen.

Another big holiday we observed was Pchum Ben, where we paid respect to our deceased relatives and ancestors. Once again, lots of food preparation was involved. A real favorite of ours was noum masome, the Cambodian version of “tamales,” something we weren’t used to having throughout the year because we didn’t have much money, and also because it took so long to make. Even though making noum masome was very time-consuming, it was a very big deal to all of us kids, and we loved to participate in the process. We first had to clean banana leaves and then put them in the sun to dry. Then we cut them into the size that we needed. Rice had to be washed, soaked to soften it, and then drained. Mung beans were soaked overnight, so the skin could be peeled off easily, and pork had to be marinated. When we were ready to assemble them, we spread pork fat on the banana leaves so nothing would stick to them, ladled on our yummy concoction, then rolled them up. After Grandma folded the ends and tied them closed with brown yarn, she would pass them to us kids, sitting attentively on a mat. Our job was to tie off the middle. Then they were cooked in a big pot for the rest of the night. When they were done, we tied them together in pairs with yarn so we could sling them over the clothesline to dry. Since we didn’t have a refrigerator, if there were any left after three days we cut them up and fried them, which would make them last a little longer.

During this holiday, we took food to the temple to offer to our dead, presented it while burning incense, and prayed to our loved ones who

had passed on.

Mom's efforts to supplement income

Dad's salary was low, and Mom wanted to do something to try to supplement our income so we could have a better life. She took off to Thailand often via train to buy fabric for sarongs and other items to bring home and sell. There were certain checkpoints where police would come on the train to check for permits. If you didn't have money to bribe them, they would confiscate everything you were trying to bring back. Unfortunately, that meant that my mother usually came back empty-handed. Dad loved her so much, and he never ever said anything when her plans failed. There were a few times, though, when she was able to bring us kids some surprises. I loved the high heels she brought me when I was ten or eleven, but they were hard to walk in and I didn't want them to get dirty, so I only wore them to weddings (which went on for several days) and for special holiday celebrations.

My mom was gone as long as four days on those trips, which left my grandmother, who was now living with us, to care for eight children. Grandmother would struggle to buy enough food to prepare for our meals, since Mom left her very little money. She sometimes cooked us cows' brains for the whole day's meals, because that was the cheapest source of protein. We didn't normally eat breakfast, so our two main meals consisted of rice and steamed cows' brains.

Mom would also go buy silk, a very desirable fabric, at a wholesale market to re-sell in villages around us. People loved to make it into beautiful skirts and blouses to wear for special occasions, such as weddings, Pchum Ben, New Year's celebrations, and certain feasts at the temple. Sometimes people didn't have money to buy silk, so my mom

would trade it for rice. She would then exchange the rice for cash to buy more stuff, because we already had enough rice at that time.

Another unsuccessful attempt by my mother to make extra money was when she bought a small plot of land to mine in the city of Pailin, which was known for a variety of precious gems, including rare, blue sapphires. It is located in western Cambodia near the border of Thailand, surrounded by forests, and is unusually cold. This was also an area known to have a very high incidence of malaria, and some people died when they didn't get proper medical treatment. Rotona was still too young to be left at home, so one time my mom took my baby brother and me with her so I could look after him while she went a short distance away to dig for sapphires. While she was gone, Rotona got hungry, became fussy, started crying his head off, and I didn't know what to do, so I started crying, too. What a scene—little baby and little girl holding baby—both terribly upset and crying, until my mother returned. She didn't find any good stones. A few months later, she took Dad, Thavy and Polly with her to dig around some more. They didn't find any stones worth anything that time either, and Polly caught malaria there. She became extremely ill and nearly died. She was in and out of the hospital frequently. Thank God she made it!

Chores

I was old enough now to help with chores. Grandma did the cooking since Mom was gone so much trying to make extra money. My older siblings and I did all the other work around the house. We weren't good at keeping the house clean when Mom was gone, and Grandma didn't care, but we sure got it all tidied up in a hurry when we heard she was coming home. I helped take care of my little siblings, fetched water, and

did laundry—by hand, of course. We also had to gather branches, dry them, and then cut them into smaller pieces to be used as firewood for cooking. One time I cut off the tip of my ring finger with the machete I was using, but I didn't tell my parents because I knew they would take me to the hospital, and I was really frightened of hospitals. People who went in sometimes never came out.

On the weekends, I made strong tea, added ice, put it in a plastic bag, inserted a straw, tied it closed, and then tried to sell it at a rest area where the bus stopped between Phnom Penh and Battambang. I sometimes sold hot rice wrapped in banana leaves there, too. I walked among the people calling out, "Buy my cold tea! Buy my hot rice!" Sometimes I would be successful, sometimes not. If I made any money I always gave it all to my mom.

I also remember being sent to catch fish with a net. We had to wade into the stream, and it was terrifying when I came out with leeches stuck to my legs sucking my blood. People often went to the bathroom in the water because we didn't have toilets, and it was not unusual to see human waste floating around. Sometimes it actually got caught in our nets, but it happened to everyone, so we just thought it was a normal thing. We also tried to catch fish in the rice paddies. We had to repeatedly dip our loosely woven bamboo baskets in the water, which was very time-consuming and tiring, and I often wondered if it was worth it just to catch some small fish and baby shrimp.

Saream

After less than a year, my parents found a big house to rent up the street. The landlord was renting a separate room to a "college" student. (Remember that what we referred to as college is called junior high and

high school in many other parts of the world.) His parents lived in a village, but he was here by himself to finish his education. His name was Saream and he married my sister Thavy later on during the Pol Pot regime.

A new baby

In late 1974, Mom delivered her ninth child, Kosal. We were all so excited to have this new, beautiful baby boy in our lives.

WAR INTENSIFYING

Now the war was getting closer and closer to us. We could hear the missiles being launched in the villages nearby. My parents heard people say that all legal documents should be destroyed, but they weren't sure why. This was the only time I saw my date of birth and learned when my birthday was. I don't remember if my parents burned or buried our important documents. We still existed, but proof of it didn't. Many people who had gold and diamonds buried them. At this time, Dad sent everyone except Thavy, Polly, and me to stay with aunts in Battambang. He wanted us to stay in school for as long as possible. A big test was coming up that I had to pass in order to advance to the next grade.

The town quickly got smaller and quieter with less traffic, as families were leaving to try to get to a safe place.

Since Mom and Grandma were not around, Dad would try to be our "chef." We had moved again, to a house that was surrounded by many banana trees. He went looking around outside and came back with wild mushrooms for us to eat. After he presented us with his stir fry, we promptly all got deathly ill, except for Dad, who was only mildly sick. We were vomiting violently and had severe diarrhea. Polly and I were the sickest and were so dehydrated and weak that we couldn't even get

up to make it to the bathroom. Dad pulled up a piece of plywood near where we were lying to make a hole in the floor and put a bucket on the ground under it, but we were rarely able to make it that short distance over there to our makeshift toilet. We felt pretty sure that we were going to die. Poor Polly was still recovering from malaria. Dad brought a doctor to the house, and he gave each of us an injection, and we all got better. I don't know what the injection was. Maybe it helped, or maybe the poison had worked its way through our systems and we were about to get over it anyway. I didn't have much time to study, and a few days later I had to take my big test. I was overjoyed when I passed it and could tell that Dad was really proud of me.

MOVING TREES

Shortly after that, Mom was able to come back to be with us because the fighting in nearby areas had calmed down a little bit. A neighbor told her about an opportunity to go harvest rice for free in the rice paddies located in an isolated area a couple of miles outside of town. She did not know that he and some other residents in town were working with the Khmer Rouge. They were told by the Khmer Rouge to get as many people as possible to go there since it was a place where they could be captured easily. Mom took sixteen-year-old Thavy along to help harvest so they could get lots of rice. There were many people in town, including our friends and neighbors, who also went there. Mom was working very hard, and when she looked up, she suddenly noticed the trees around the rice paddy were moving. It was Khmer Rouge soldiers who had tied tree branches around themselves as camouflage so they could get close without being detected. They captured them all at gunpoint, and threatened to kill them if they didn't go with them. Mom was terrified. Crying, she pleaded with them to not take Thavy and her. She also told them she had a new baby at home, and in desperation, she lifted up her shirt to reveal her breasts that were engorged from not breastfeeding all day. It seemed like they were going to take pity on her. Several of the soldiers removed the ropes from around their waists and

then hid them in an effort to blend in, so that soldiers from Lon Nol's army (who they were fighting) would think that they, too, were civilians. Then they escorted Mom back to the main road. She was the only one they let leave. At home, we had heard that the Khmer Rouge had captured everyone who had gone to harvest rice. We were all very sad and crying, including Dad, who was holding baby Kosal, who was also crying because he was hungry. When the sun was about to set, there was Mom walking down the road. The soldiers had let her go only because she had promised to bring the whole family back—which was a promise she did not intend to keep, of course. We were relieved to see her but distressed because Thavy did not return with her. Of course, Mom blamed herself and cried for days. After about a week, Thavy was able to send a message back with the insiders that were working with the Khmer Rouge to send clothes. At least she was still alive.

BACK TO BATTAMBANG

Dad knew that the Khmer Rouge were about to close in on our town, so he sent Grandma and my younger siblings on to Battambang. My parents, Polly, baby Kosal, and I stayed behind, in the hope that Thavy would soon return. A few days later, we heard that the Khmer Rouge had destroyed all small bridges over creeks on the way to Battambang. That way they would be able to capture people, since they wouldn't be able to get through. It was time for the rest of us to leave quickly. Somehow Mom was able to hire a tuk-tuk to try to get us to where the rest of the family was in Battambang. We were the only people on the road. Many people stayed in Moug because they knew that, with the bridges destroyed, it would be nearly impossible to get away, so they felt stuck there. Our tuk-tuk driver maneuvered his way around and through creeks that didn't have lots of water in them at that time of year. We could hear the bullets flying by our heads. It felt like a miracle, but we made it to Battambang.

The Khmer Rouge had advanced through villages first, since most people there were farmers without much education and could be easily forced to train for their army. Their army had gotten big and powerful. A few months later, Pol Pot was successful in completely taking over the

country. It was April 17, 1975. I was twelve years old.

At first, I felt great relief that we no longer had to keep running away from the fighting and sounds of missiles, bombs, and gunfire that accompanied it. There was a general feeling that there would be peace after the Khmer Rouge took power. The large city of Battambang was now eerily silent. All shops, markets, schools, temples, and hospitals were closed. Initially, I was very happy that I didn't have to go to school. Since we didn't have TV or radio to let us know what was happening, people mostly just stayed in their homes. My aunts and their neighbors were very quiet, and I sensed that they knew what was going to happen next.

THREE YEARS, EIGHT MONTHS, TWENTY DAYS

It wasn't long until Pol Pot's army ordered almost everyone in the city to leave at once. Those who worked for the railroad were allowed to stay because they were thought to be instrumental in getting the trains running again. My parents decided to go back to Moung because that's where they were living when Thavy was taken, and they thought she may still be somewhere near there, and that's where she would go to look for them if she was able to escape.

Exodus

If you multiply many times over whatever emotions you feel as you read on, believe me when I say you still cannot imagine it. Some things just cannot be put into words.

We took what we could carry on our head and shoulders—some pots and pans, silverware, food, blankets, and mats to sleep on—and started walking. We joined thousands of other people heading out of the city. We were ordered to leave on foot. Not even bicycles were allowed. The only vehicles on the road were the ones carrying the Khmer Rouge

soldiers, all dressed in black. We had gotten used to the sound of shooting, and it seemed quiet now that it had stopped. It felt surreal. There was confusion and despair. The hollow, vacant look in many peoples' eyes was haunting. Some families carried their elderly and sick in makeshift hammocks, or they were just left behind at the side of the road if they had no family to help them. Everyone was just doing the best they could to survive. At times, children were quiet. At other times, they wailed. Toddlers became separated from their parents, sometimes forever. We took turns carrying Kosal. The smaller cities we passed along the way had already been evacuated, and most of the buildings had been either partially or completely destroyed. The first night we stopped in one of these abandoned cities with other refugees and built a fire to cook what little food we had. Then we unrolled our mats on the ground and tried to get some sleep. As we got closer to Moung, there were fewer people on the road. I think they might have gone off the main road because they were so exhausted, and tried to make it to another village instead. One time when I left the road to go behind tall bushes to go to the bathroom, I saw a huge field piled with dead bodies. I went back and told my parents, but they just kept on walking. I would learn much later that many of the corpses were former government workers and soldiers from Lon Nol's army (the good guys) who had surrendered and had been told they were going to be taken to welcome Prince Sihanouk (now a bad guy) back to the country. Instead, they were loaded onto trucks, massacred, dumped, and left to rot in one of the many killing fields. This was the start of the frequently recurring thought that *I'm going to be next*. It took us two full days to walk the twenty or so miles to Moung. On the same night that we got back to the house we had lived in before, the Khmer Rouge came and told us at gunpoint that we had to leave either right then or in the morning, and go to a village away from the

main road.

Roluos

The village of Roluos was about seven miles west of Moung, and my parents decided that we would go there because they were already familiar with it since my mother used to go there to sell silk. When we arrived at this former rice farming village, there was hardly anyone around. Most of the residents had fled due to the fighting. No Khmer Rouge soldiers had arrived there yet. The area was overgrown with weeds and other vegetation. Most of the homes had been destroyed in the war, but there were some remaining that had been partially burned and others that had been under construction, but were not yet finished. We chose to stay under a house without walls, but one that would provide a roof over our heads. My father cut away the tall weeds and we put down our mats to sleep on.

It was very quiet and spooky, but soon others joined us here. Many of the previous residents returned, and there were also lots of newcomers who had been displaced from the cities.

Chirping birds

It was a very hot and dry summer. There was not a lot of water in the nearby pond, and no edible vegetation. I remember Grandma not having anything to cook, so Vibol and I walked back into Moung to look for food. Polly was too weak to go with us. The only way into the city was along a dirt path used by foot traffic and cow-pulled carts. Entering back into this big, sprawling city that we used to call home felt very eerie. All the residents had been forced to leave, and there were Khmer Rouge soldiers there, some sleeping in hammocks, and others sitting around

listening to the radio. They all wore black, and had big guns. They saw us, but just ignored us since the takeover was so recent and the military had not yet gotten organized in terms of what they should do now. Many of the beautiful homes had been burned down or partially destroyed, and all of them were now abandoned. Large farmed areas in the back of the homes were overgrown, but the previous residents had cultivated fruit trees like jackfruit, mango, papaya, and banana. Pineapples, cassava roots, and peanuts were also there for the taking. We gathered up as much as we could carry. Of course, all of this felt very creepy to us, but the thing that struck me the most was the sound of literally thousands of chirping birds in the trees. It seems like the trees were filled with them, and they were making SO much noise.

On the way back to our village, we were almost the only people on the path. I went behind some tall bushes to go to the bathroom and saw some dead bodies there. They appeared to have been there for a while. This was becoming a more commonplace sight. I returned to the path quickly and quietly and kept on walking. Back in Roluos, Grandma was very happy to see us return safely and with food. When I think back about this day, I get goosebumps. I suppose I always will.

We control you now

It wasn't long until Pol Pot's leaders started to arrive in the village. They had begun to figure out how they wanted to run things. Rules and regulations were about to start. At first, we were allowed to all live together as a family. The head of the family had to register all family members by name and age. One reason this was done was so they would know how much rice to provide for each household.

The village had grown quite large and, initially, it was divided into

four sections with about seventy-five to one hundred families in each. There were one or two “Pol Pot families” living in each group, and a civilian was chosen to assist with running it. We were told to build our own shack but were not provided with building materials or tools of any kind. Since my father had been educated to be a teacher, he didn’t know how to go about building a shack for us, but since he already knew many of the people, he learned by watching and helping others build their dwellings first, and then they helped us with ours. Big trees had to be cut for the foundation, which was elevated off the ground to keep the house dry and to keep out snakes, scorpions, centipedes, and other crawling insects. Bamboo was used for the floor. Needles were fashioned from wood. Empty rice bags were torn apart to make string. Palm leaves were sewed together and used for the walls and roof. It took a few weeks, but then we had our own little shack to call home.

In the beginning, people still had a few possessions that could be exchanged among themselves for other things. Mom would trade for salt, something our bodies were crucially lacking. People weren’t allowed to wear jewelry but some kept it hidden to trade for things they needed. Some people had money, but it was useless since there were no markets and nothing to buy.

Tree snacks

Other than rice, we had to fend for ourselves to find other sources of food, such as wild potatoes, mushrooms, and a whole variety of other edibles. There were giant ants that lived high up in the trees and built huge nests. We would put a basket on the end of a long stick and reach up and puncture the nest, and tons of white ant eggs would fall into our basket. They were quite tasty when used in cooking, but if we were very

hungry we just ate them fresh from the nest. We would get bitten lots in the process of collecting our ant eggs because ants would also accompany the eggs when the nest was punctured.

Bee hives were considered a good find, but it was a little tricky getting them. We wrapped dry leaves around the end of a stick, lit it, and then held it by the hive. The bees would fly out and away because they didn't like the smoke. Yes, we sometimes got stung. We then proudly carried the whole hive home that was filled with both honey and larvae. The larvae tasted so delicious when barbecued.

When we were out looking for firewood, we would keep our eyes out for tarantulas, that were also quite tasty cooked in our fire pit.

Centipedes were common, and we were frequently bitten by them, too. We never resorted to eating them, although some people did.

When we were near water, we saw where crabs had dug down deep to try to find moist areas to live, so we would dig down and sometimes find some small ones. We had to proceed with caution, though, because sometimes a snake, not a crab, would emerge from the hole.

Fill the water barrel

Another chore my mother assigned me was to go fetch water. It was about a fifteen-minute walk to the pond. I had two buckets, and was told to go back and forth till our big barrel was filled. After two trips I told Mom, "I'm tired" and that I wasn't going to go back for more. Mom started swatting me with a stick, so I pretended I was dead. I think she thought I was unconscious, so she stopped hitting me, and I got up and ran away and hid in the bushes, crying. I didn't like being punished, and because she did it, again I thought, *I'm not her daughter.*

Polly

At first, all of us kids except Polly were allowed to stay with our parents, but because she was fourteen, she was made to accompany other teenagers and adults to “Front line #1, the group of sharp strength.” The hardest work with the highest expectations was assigned to this group, and they had to work from sunrise to sunset seven days a week. They had to live away from their families, and could be punished or tortured to death if they weren’t compliant. Polly was lucky in the sense that, when she became very ill with fever, chills, and shivering almost immediately after being sent away, they returned her to the village for my parents to care for her. There were no medical facilities or doctors or nurses, and the only treatment for her was my dad’s home remedy that he made from ginger root, garlic, and black pepper boiled in water. After Polly drank it, she did seem to get some better. Mom knew that Polly wouldn’t survive there. She was too weak and unable to work. In the very early stages of the takeover by Pol Pot, rules weren’t very strict, and Mom got permission from our group leader (and also bribed him in some way) to let Polly go live with Auntie Thon in Battambang where there was better medicine and more opportunities for health care.

Thon’s husband, who worked for the railroad, took Polly back with him the next time he came through our area. We were all so relieved because we felt she was safe with Auntie. Little did we know that shortly after arriving there, all those remaining in Battambang were divided up based upon their age and sent with those in their age group to live and work together. They took Polly from my aunt and put her on the train to be dropped off in the town of Posat. While Polly was on the train, she saw some of Mom’s relatives being transported somewhere by the Khmer Rouge. She shouted to them, “Go find my mom—she’s in

Roluos!”

Saving relatives

Within a few weeks, my mom’s parents came looking for us in Roluos. They were weak and thin, and it was obvious they were in the early stages of starvation. They said they had been dropped off in a place that was very hot and dry, that it was difficult to get to water, and that hardly anything could grow there. They did not have enough food. Mom cooked them rice and they ate their fill, and then they brought lots of rice back to where other relatives of ours were starving. My mom had been very frugal with the rice that was allotted to our family and had hidden extra in a barrel to be used for emergencies.

My grandparents and most of my mom’s siblings had been living in Phnom Penh prior to Pol Pot. When they were evacuated from the heart of the city, they decided to go back to the village on the outskirts of Phnom Penh where my grandparents had previously lived. It was well known that many of the residents there had been well educated and were wealthy. Their prestigious status due to money and education posed a threat to the Khmer Rouge ideals, so Pol Pot ordered the military to bring the entire village to an area that was very dry with nothing there, and to leave them there as punishment. They were basically left to die, because there was no food and not enough water. Mom worked her magic, and somehow was able to convince our leader (again, via a bribe) to give her permission to go get her twenty-five or so family members and bring them back to Roluos. We were worried about her safety because if other Khmer Rouge soldiers saw her, they might not believe she had gotten permission, and could have killed her. My mother risked her life so many times during all this. She returned in a few days with all

of our extended family members who had been dumped in that desolate area, and gave them all the excess rice she had hidden and was saving for emergencies. My grandfather, who was only in his 60's, was exhausted and very ill, and died at our house within a week of his arrival. The rest of the relatives built their own shacks to live in.

Stricter rules

After several months, things became more organized and the rules got very strict. We were told that we wouldn't need to cook for ourselves anymore and were ordered to bring all our pots, pans, cooking utensils, and silverware to the public kitchen. They gave each person a spoon and a small metal container that would be "filled" at mealtimes.

All females were required to have their hair cut short. Each person was provided one black shirt and one pair of black pants. We were allowed to keep the clothes we had, but had to dye the whole outfit black using tree bark or certain kinds of fruit that were natural dyes. They also gave us shoes that had been made from tires.

Now families were separated. Young men were sent to labor camps far from the village. Children aged five and up were taken from their parents, grouped together according to age, and lived in camps with those in their age group. The younger you were, the closer you got to stay to your home. Kosal, who was still a toddler, stayed at home under the care of my grandmother, who was frail and considered too old to work away from home. My parents were assigned jobs away from home but were allowed to come home at night.

Sokhomol was only five and was so homesick that he tried to run away to where my parents were, but a "tall man with big eyes" caught

him and brought him back. He did make it all the way “home” another time, but on the way, he saw a flying saucer come out of a bush, and there was an alien with one big eye looking out at him. The darkness of night can play tricks on one’s eyes, but to this very day, my brother swears it really happened. The next day he was taken back to his camp.

Each group was assigned work based on age. For example, the youngest group was assigned to go around and pick up cow dung to be used as fertilizer. I was twelve at the time and big for my age, so I was put with a group of young teenagers. I was very sad and nervous having to live apart from my family. I still suffer from separation anxiety at times. The goal was to keep us busy doing as much work as possible, and we were required to work seven days a week from sunrise to sunset. Our Khmer Rouge team leader would bang on a pot when it was time to get up in the morning, and also when it was time to take a break to eat. Our camp was moved to different locations, depending on the season. In the summer, we cut and cleared bushes and dug the dirt to make irrigation fields for rice paddies prior to the rainy season. We planted vegetables in the spring, and worked in the rice fields in winter.

We slept on a mat under cover of a tarp or roof made of palm leaves. At night our group leader would try to distract us from thinking about our parents by teaching us songs and to dance. One song we were taught went something like this:

“We are the children of Pol Pot,

Pol Pot gives us happiness,

Gives us the future,

We love him unconditionally,

He is like God to us.”

I liked it better when Manirath, my friend who was a good storyteller, would tell us ghost stories, even though her stories really spooked us.

You will not capture my spirit

This same routine went on for about three years, but there was so much more than I can describe. Everyone was the same. No one was allowed to have their own identity. Work as hard as you can. Keep quiet. Do not show any emotion. Obey without question. Follow all rules. Once I took a quick break to go to the bathroom behind a bush, and there was a dead young woman’s body there in plain sight for all to see what happens if you don’t follow the rules. I did what I was told, but resolved that I would not let them capture my spirit.

Thavy reappears

About eight months after she was captured, Thavy suddenly appeared one day. We were overjoyed to see her. She had a new name, was healthy, and looked so cute in her black outfit with her short haircut. She had found out where we were from a friend of hers who worked as a nurse in Moung. A temple there had been converted into a hospital, and one of her patients was a sick villager from Roluos, who passed on information about our whereabouts.

Thavy was living in one of the abandoned houses on the eastern outskirts of Moung, and Roluos was on the western outskirts, so all this time she hadn’t been very far from us. She told us that when she was first captured, they had her work as a teacher for young children, but that she was trained as a nurse shortly after there was an epidemic of

vomiting and diarrhea. She also took care of injured Khmer Rouge soldiers. She had been trained by doctors who had sided with the Khmer Rouge before the takeover.

As a nurse, she was accorded higher status and given extra privileges. She was considered “one of them,” since she was captured before the fall of the regime. She could come and go as she liked. Medical supplies, food, and clothing were kept in a big warehouse, and she had access to it. She got permission from her team leader to take a few extra things—within reason. Still, she sneaked extra medicine and food and brought it to us. She told Mom not to trade it because if she got caught, she would be punished. She was also trying to keep a low profile because she didn’t want any attention directed to her family. If the Khmer Rouge found out that Dad was an educated man, she knew they would both be killed. (He had survived, thus far, because of his dark skin. Dark-skinned Cambodians were thought to be uneducated farmers who posed no threat to the Khmer Rouge ideals.) As you already know, Mom was stubborn, made her own decisions, and didn’t listen to Thavy. When people in our village were sick, they were given a handful of “pills” (resembling bunny poop) that the Khmer Rouge had made from natural substances. No one was sure if they did anything to make a person better, so when we didn’t have enough to eat, Mom traded the real pills that Thavy had given her, in exchange for rice and salt.

Bone bodies

In the beginning, we were provided with enough to eat, especially during rice harvest season. At mealtime, we would stand in line with our little metal containers that had a divider down the middle, and they would ladle rice on one side and a “soup” of morning glories and dried fish on

the other. Pig food. This was exactly what we fed our pig when we had one in the past. Then there was less and less food—barely enough to survive. We were mostly fed water with a little rice in it. We later found out that large quantities of the rice we had planted and harvested were being exported by the Khmer Rouge to China.

I remember being sent home from my camp once because I was sick, and cooked a few wild beans I had collected from a small *sesbania-bispinosa* tree. My grandmother was slowly starving to death and asked me to share them with her. I was starving, too, and didn't want to share, so I only gave her a little bit. Not long after that, she died while rocking Kosal in his hammock. To this day, I still regret that I didn't share a little more with her, even though I understand now that I couldn't have done anything to save her.

Now everyone seemed to be starving. People were further weakened from dehydration caused by vomiting and diarrhea. People were so skinny that they looked like skeletons with a thin layer of skin stretched over their bones.

People started dying left and right, in seemingly epidemic proportions. All you would hear is, "This person died" or "That person died." I kept thinking *I'm going to be next*. I worried so much about my younger brothers, and each time I returned from my work group, I feared that they would no longer be there. Besides my grandmother, other relatives I lost were a great aunt, her son and his wife and child, my mom's third cousin and two of her children. Remember my uncle who threw the porcelain plate? He lost his wife and all three of his children. I try not to blame him, but he still had gold that he could have traded for food. Maybe he didn't think it would get to this point and was saving it for another time when he thought he would need it more. Everyone was

doing the best they could just to survive, and a brain in a starving body isn't always able to think clearly or make the best decisions.

Everyone was too exhausted and weak to dig proper graves for their relatives, so most of those who had died were just buried in shallow graves.

Thavy's unconventional wedding

Thavy came back to live in Roluos because a new group of Khmer Rouge leaders had come, and everyone in the first group of Khmer Rouge had been demoted and replaced. She had been given the choice of becoming a civilian again or being killed. Because she was seventeen, upon returning "home," she was immediately sent to work in the camp assigned the hardest labor.

Married men were allowed to come home to visit their wives once a month, but the birth rate remained very low. Conditions were such that most women had become sterile. I don't even remember hearing about anyone giving birth, although I'm sure there were some babies being born somewhere. Most newborns succumbed quickly from dehydration and disease. Because of this, Pol Pot started ordering mass weddings of unmarried adults to try to increase the birth rate.

Within three months of her return, Thavy was told she was to be married. About twenty other women were also chosen. Thavy said that they were taken to a room one night where chairs had been arranged in pairs. Each pair of chairs already had a man sitting in one of the chairs, and the chair next to him was empty. One by one, each woman was called to go sit next to the man that had been chosen to be her husband. "You sit there. That's your husband. Now you are married." Thavy was

told to go sit next to Saream. Since they knew each other from the time Saream shared a room in my family's house while they were both attending school together, Saream had persuaded the group leader to let him marry her. I was sad and also furious when I found out my pretty sister had been married to dark-skinned Saream. Since I had been ridiculed because of my dark skin starting at a young age, I just assumed that having dark skin must be a bad thing.

Thavy told us that more than half of the couples did not like their assigned mate and refused to stay together. They got reprimanded by the leader, and then if they still refused to consummate the marriage and live together as husband and wife, they would be punished or even killed. Some who feared for their lives just pretended to like each other so they could be spared. One disobedient couple just disappeared—you know what that means!

Please don't steal rice, Mom

Harvesting and processing rice was very labor intensive and time consuming. Almost everyone, including young children, helped. The women cut the stalks and the children helped them gather it up and stack it. The men hauled it to a dry area so it could dry out. Then it was ready for threshing—separating the rice from the straw—which was accomplished by banging on it repeatedly with a heavy implement and then separating it. During the rice harvest season, we were usually given enough rice to eat, but Mom started hiding rice in her sarong for future supply because she knew we wouldn't have enough to eat other times of the year.

Now that Thavy was a married woman, she was reassigned to a group with other married women. She and Saream had their own shack

in the village, and her work assignments were there. She knew that Mom was stealing rice and had heard that one of the leaders was aware of it and was keeping a close eye on her. Thavy kept warning her that she was being watched, and told her repeatedly to stop stealing. Mom became furious with her for telling her what she should and shouldn't do, and told her, "I am your mother. I know what I am doing." That woman was so darn stubborn, and was willing to take big chances trying to help her family survive. Shortly after that, she was arrested for stealing, and the soldiers took her away. We thought that they might have killed her, and we were so distressed, but it was dangerous for us to openly express our feelings of sadness and grief. About a month later, a friend told me she had found out that Mom was alive, that she knew where she was, and asked me if I wanted to go see her. The two of us asked for permission to go visit some of her relatives who lived in another village. After walking through the countryside for a couple of hours, we came to a big, open area surrounded by a chicken wire fence and saw prisoners working in the field. I recognized my mom, who was quite a distance away, and when she glanced over in our direction, I could tell that she recognized me, too. I had wrapped some sarongs in a scarf and signaled that I was leaving them by the fence for her. We then continued walking to the village where my friend's relatives lived. Unfortunately, they weren't there, so we had to turn right around and start heading back to our "home" camp. Returning the same route, I saw that the package I had left for my mom was gone. I was relieved to know that she was alive and felt it was worth the risk it took to see her. She was released after about three months.

What's going on?

Now it seemed like things were starting to unravel quickly. We heard

planes flying overhead and the sound of shooting off in the distance. Then it started getting closer to us. We had no idea what was going on. I don't know if the Khmer Rouge leaders knew, but when they heard it, they took off on horseback for the jungle where they couldn't be seen. I remember running from the sounds of the bullets, lying in an irrigation ditch, and repeating the same prayer of supplication my grandfather had taught us. The Khmer Rouge returned when the planes went away and things calmed down. They would flee again when planes and sound of gunfire returned. One time they took everyone in my work group deep into the jungle with them, and we were told to build roads there. I wondered why they were having us build roads in the jungle when we already had beautiful main roads that were built prior to the Communists. Now I realize that they were planning to use these new roads as their escape route.

We were only there for a brief time until we were all ordered to go back to Roluos with them. Things became even more disorganized, and there was an atmosphere of chaos. It seemed the Khmer Rouge leaders were confused about what they should do, and we didn't know what to do, either. The few times that the leaders had left, we knew we could have escaped then, but we stayed. We felt confused and in limbo since we had no clue what was going on.

When the leaders returned from the jungle for the last time, they asked everyone for the names of people who had tried to leave when they were gone. They also asked everyone to turn in others who had fought against them in the military before the takeover. People feared for their own lives if they didn't speak up, so they started reporting others. A friend came to me saying, "My parents are gone. I heard they took them." Whole households suddenly disappeared, never to be seen again.

I was sent to another camp just outside the village and heard people in my group whispering to one another about lots of fresh, dead bodies that had been dumped in a ditch right near us. *I'm next*. Not long after that, I was sent back to the village where families were now living together in their shacks again.

Polly returns

We hadn't heard anything about our sister Polly for the past three years. We didn't even know if she was still alive, but decided to believe that she was safe with my aunt in Battambang. Then one day she came walking into Roluos accompanied by her husband, two brothers-in-law and a sister-in-law. I thought I was hallucinating. Here was my long-gone sister, now married, seven months pregnant, looking healthy, beautiful, and simply glowing. Her husband had only allowed her to carry a tea pot on the long walk here. She told us that, as soon as she arrived in Battambang three years ago to live with and be cared for by our aunt, the Khmer Rouge separated everyone into age groups and sent them to different places to work, just as they had done to us in Roluos. She never even got to live with our aunt, but was sent to the city of Posat, where she was later married to Roun. She told us that Posat had just been freed by people in planes shooting guns who had chased the Khmer Rouge away. It seems the Khmer Rouge were being defeated in an east to west fashion, but Polly felt desperate to see us and didn't want to stay there and wait until our village was freed. She said the risk would be worth it to her even if she died one minute after getting to see all of us.

The Khmer Rouge were suspicious of all newcomers and came to our shack a few days after they arrived and told them, "You're not a part

of our village. We have to take you back where you came from.” Twelve-year-old Sopheak followed them as they were led away. The soldiers didn’t see her. They brought them to the temple that was now being used as a base for the soldiers. There were no walls, and Sopheak climbed a tree and watched from there. The soldiers shackled their ankles to the ground, but they were able to loosen them. Everyone except Polly ran away. Polly was too far along in her pregnancy to get away, even if she tried. I think she also stayed because she knew if she tried to run away, her family would be punished.

The guards took off after the others on horseback and caught her sister-in-law and brought her back. The three men made it to the next village and were able to assimilate there. Polly and her sister-in-law were tortured and killed before sunset that same day. The guards took turns jumping from an elevated platform onto Polly’s pregnant belly. Blood was coming from her mouth and nose; actually, it seemed that her whole body was covered with blood. Little Sopheak witnessed the whole thing, including seeing her take her last breath on Earth.

WHO ARE OUR SAVIORS?

Less than two weeks later, we heard shooting again in a nearby village. At this time, there were only about twenty Khmer Rouge leaders and their families left. They ordered everyone in the village to follow them to the jungle, miles away from the village. We felt like we were barely hanging on to life, but we all obediently went with them, walking for several days until we got to the jungle and could not be seen by the planes. I think their plan was to kill us. We were all cold, weak, tired, and sick, and there was no food or water there. The sound of bullets continued to get closer and closer to us, and finally all the Khmer Rouge leaders fled deeper in the jungle, never to return to us again. Since we were no longer under their control, we knew we were free to leave and do whatever we wanted to do, but we didn't know exactly what that meant. I'm guessing there were close to a thousand of us left, and we all started walking together through the jungle in the direction of the sound of the airplanes and shooting. We still had no idea who was fighting the Khmer Rouge, but since the Khmer Rouge ran from them, we figured their plan was to help us. We found out later it was the Vietnamese, and saving the people suffering under Pol Pot's rule was never their primary goal. So, yes, I guess they were our saviors, but it was just an incidental occurrence on the way to achieving their goal.

Years after all this happened, I learned that, back in 1977, the Khmer Rouge started attacking border towns in Vietnam that had once been part of the Khmer Republic, with the goal of taking that land back. They killed thousands of Vietnamese civilians. They may have also been motivated by fear that the Vietnamese would try to expand into Cambodia at some point and dominate them. It seems that the last straw was the Khmer Rouge's torture and massacre that wiped out an entire Vietnamese village of about 3,000 people. In December of 1978, Vietnam launched a massive invasion of Cambodia, quickly defeated the Khmer Rouge, and took over the country. They would occupy Cambodia until 1979.

IN SEARCH OF A HOME

On we walked, still oblivious at this point to what was going on. Our bodies were decently nourished because it was right after the rice harvest, and we had plenty of rice to eat. It doesn't mean we weren't hungry, though. I remember coming across a dead cow and we devoured it, not knowing or caring if it had died from disease. The first night we slept in an irrigation ditch, and the next day we arrived at a small town where a few Khmer Rouge soldiers were hiding—but they were no longer a threat to us. Rice was still growing in the paddies, so we gathered some, and also took a cow and cart that had been abandoned. This wasn't considered stealing. All the previous residents had left due to the war, and anything you could find was free for the taking. We stayed there several weeks and then left for Moug, where we had lived before the Pol Pot regime. Lots of refugees were there, as well as previous members of the Khmer Rouge who weren't able to get away and were trying to blend in as civilians. Someone pointed out to my mom one of the guards who killed Polly, and she, along with other relatives and civilians, attacked her. My mom was beating her so hard and wouldn't have stopped until she had killed her, but Vietnamese soldiers were there and pulled her off. Even though they said they were taking that guard to prison, I think they just let her go.

Our house in Moung, where we enjoyed our life for about three years, was no longer there. There wasn't much of anything at all there anymore in this previously thriving city. Money had no meaning, and we just traded for things we needed till we had hardly anything left to trade. After a number of weeks and still not knowing what we were going to do, we decided to go back to the aunt in Battambang who had been so good to us before. Unfortunately, she had become brainwashed and frightened by the Khmer Rouge, and she did not welcome us there. She had taken ownership of a large house whose owners had died, and would not even let us sleep under the house. One of her neighbors was kind enough to allow us to crawl under her house to sleep, but it was near a pond, so the ground was wet, and it was very uncomfortable. After about a week, we moved in with Saream's parents who were now living about four miles away. They were lucky to have found a nice abandoned home.

There was a field nearby with lots of cows, and Saream's parents had claimed six or seven of them. One of my Dad's chores there was to "look after" the cows. He tried, but wasn't really great at the job, even after having the idea to mark them with chalk so he could keep track of them better.

One of my jobs was to trade at the wholesale market for lantern fuel. Sometimes Vibol, Sopheak, and I would accompany farmers on their carts to neighboring villages to try to trade it for rice. My success was variable.

While living there, we met Pen Lang, a cousin of Saream's. (Even though her last name was Pen, and her first name was Lang, others always called her both names together, with her last name first.) She had lost her husband and children in the war, and she and my family quickly

became close friends. To us, she was just “Auntie.”

Saream’s parents had managed to save quite a bit of gold, and Saream and Pen Lang had made a few trips to Thailand to buy supplies. My mom still had a little gold that she had hidden away and decided to send Vibol and me with them one time. This was a very dangerous journey. Many land mines had been planted, and there were Khmer Rouge guerillas hiding in the jungle. They would try to rob you, and if you didn’t cooperate, they would kill you first, and then rob you. The man who was leading us seemed to know when it was safe to cross through that area, and we made it through okay. It took us three days to get there. We used up our profits just buying food to eat while we were there, so we returned empty-handed. We were gone over a week, and Mom was so worried that we were dead that she never allowed us to go again, much to my relief. We had barely enough to eat for the next few months.

We were living right by the main freeway, and one day when my brother Chantom was playing outside, a big truck filled with many of our relatives drove by heading in the direction of Phnom Penh. They smiled and waved to him, and he ran right in to tell Mom. We found out they were returning to Phnom Penh and they hadn’t invited us to go with them! Mom had rescued many of them and was so angry that they had not invited us to go back with them that she said, “They went east, so we’ll go west.”

The time that Vibol and I had gone west to Thailand with Saream and Pen Lang, we had passed by a big refugee camp on the way, and since there were no jobs and nothing left for us to go back to, Mom decided we would go there. I did my best to discourage her, since it was such a long and dangerous journey and would be even tougher with little

siblings, but she had made up her mind. Dad refused to go since he knew how tough it would be to get there, and I was crying because I did not want our family to be separated again. I knew I wouldn't be happy without Dad. Mom packed up everything, including all Dad's clothes, and off we went. After about a mile we looked back, and there was Dad trailing along, carrying nothing but a tea kettle.

After one day of walking down the main roads that had previously connected thriving cities, we arrived at an abandoned train station. Vietnamese soldiers were there, and they only allowed people to pass through at certain times. They finally started to let people through when it got dark, but they closed the crossing again right when my dad got there. I was terrified and could feel my heart pounding in my chest. I told Mom to keep going with the other kids, and then I sneaked back through the security checkpoint. I was frantic. I asked everyone there if they had seen a dark-skinned man carrying a tea kettle, but no one had. I knew the guards wouldn't let me back through by myself, so I begged a man carrying a suitcase who looked like a government worker to tell them I was his daughter and take me through the checkpoint with him. After we were through, he continued on his way home, and I kept walking in the pitch-black night while crying and calling out for Mom. I felt so lost. I was very relieved to find them where they had stopped to try to sleep a little under a kind stranger's house. Everyone was exhausted, and we needed to try to get some rest to prepare for the next day, which would involve walking through more residential areas before reaching and traversing the thick jungle, where we would have to trudge through lots of mud and try to avoid other obstacles, like buried land mines and guerrillas that were waiting there.

After a few hours, we woke in the darkness and continued our

journey. We stopped to cook some food before entering the jungle, and up walked Dad with his tea kettle! He didn't know how long it would be until the guards would let the next group through, so he had gone with some people who got through via a lake crossing. He had no gold to give them in exchange for the paddleboat ride, but the others were kind enough to let him come anyway. I was overjoyed—I knew there was no chance I could ever be happy if my family was not together.

The following night, even though we were deep in the dangerous jungle, we finally had to stop to get some sleep. The children were exhausted from the long, difficult day of walking. My siblings were quiet and didn't cry. They had already experienced so much and had grown tougher in the process. We had also taken a cousin of Saream's with us, though, and he was crying and moaning. Besides having lost his parents in the war, he was also mentally disabled, and we had a very hard time quieting him. We were very nervous that the guerillas would hear us and come rob and maybe kill us.

I still have nightmares of our journey and wake up with my heart pounding. Even though we were walking with others, including some who seemed to know when it was safe to pass through to avoid the guerillas, I kind of felt responsible for my family since I had made the trip before and had a vague memory of which way to go.

We arrived at what was referred to as "Old Camp" late in the afternoon, two-and-a-half days after starting our journey. As we were entering the camp, we heard some loud "bangs" and Dad thought they were bombs, and he yelled for us to get down on the ground. We were relieved when we found out it was just the sound of people playing volleyball.

There was no help from outside sources at this camp. We were

completely on our own in this desolate area. Thai people would come meet us halfway between our two countries to sell us food and other supplies. Mom had kept a little gold and was able to exchange it for Thai money that she used to buy supplies. One time she bought beef to sell to make a little money. Some kids who came to buy some from her only had a large bill to pay for it, and since Mom didn't have change, she let them take the beef AND keep their money because they promised to return with the correct change. We never saw them again, of course.

We soon relocated about four miles away to "New Camp" since it was unsafe at Old Camp due to fighting now among three different groups: People's military, Thai military and Khmer Rouge guerillas. Mom inadvertently left some valuables behind and took a chance going back to Old Camp to look for them while the fighting and shooting were going on. I had a strong feeling that she was going to get killed. The valuables weren't where she had left them, but she was able to make her way safely back to us. Her mishaps—well-intentioned, but failed efforts—sure put a lot of stress on my heart.

New Camp was more developed, but it was very crowded, also not very safe, and had very unhealthy living conditions—yes, even worse than where we had come from. We were lucky enough to be reunited with some relatives here. The American Red Cross came at times to bring us food, water, and other supplies, but deliveries were infrequent because of the danger just getting in and out of there. When they came, we all lined up and waited patiently, but sometimes they ran out before they got to everyone.

KHAO-I-DANG

The United Nations decided to set up a refugee camp in Thailand because they thought it would be safe there. The Thai people didn't want us there, so the agency paid them for the privilege of having a camp on their soil. Big buses drove close to our camp and we were told that we were not required to go with them, but if we wanted to go, they would take us to the camp they were building there. This was the first time in years that I had ridden in a bus.

The borders of Cambodia and Thailand are separated by a mountain range, and it took about an hour—though it felt much longer—to pass over to our new home, which was a big, desolate area surrounded by a chicken wire fence. We were dropped off in the middle of nowhere via a dirt road. We would stay here for over a year. The camp had just started to be built, and there were only water tanks and toilets, but they wanted to try to get the refugees to a safe place as quickly as possible.

I will never forget about this camp. I felt like I had been born again into a completely new life. What a feeling it was to finally feel safe and to experience freedom again!

On arrival, we were welcomed by employees and volunteers from the United Nations Refugee Agency, International Red Cross, and other

European humanitarian organizations. We were immediately given a physical exam to determine our general condition and who was in need of medical care. Children were screened for contagious diseases like measles and meningitis, so that attempts could be made to control diseases from spreading.

We were provided with water, rice, dried fish, oil, and occasionally, chicken. It was too dry to grow vegetables ourselves, so sometimes we were given those, too. With good nutrition, bodies started to fill out quickly. The rapid transformation was amazing to see.

We had to build our own homes, but were provided with building supplies like wood, bamboo, and tarp. Other buildings also went up quickly, including both a Buddhist temple and Christian church located right across from each other. At one point, the large hospital that was built suffered some damage when a large fire broke out, causing everyone to evacuate the camp until it was extinguished.

This camp felt like heaven to us. There was no more fear or hunger, and we felt great freedom within the camp to do as we pleased and “be” as we pleased. It was so fun wearing colorful clothes instead of black, growing our hair long and choosing the style! We all started to enjoy life again. Cultural activities were available to us, including traditional dance and actual festivals. Entertainment in the form of plays, storytelling, comedy acts, and opera was provided. There were also classes that taught knitting and sewing. There were no textbooks, but there were quite a few refugees who had been teachers, and they made teaching materials from art supplies, and devised a curriculum. My siblings and I started back to school. All classes, including English, were taught at the temple. My father volunteered to teach. Everything we did was our choice. We had a big market where you could buy and sell things, and if

you were lucky enough to have any gold, it could be traded there for Thai money, which was the currency used at the camp. I remember selling barbecued chicken.

It was like a huge, normal town and it felt almost like a normal life, but within a contained area. It was a different story, however, if you chose to step outside the boundaries of the camp. Some Thai people came fairly near the camp to sell us merchandise, but if any refugees were caught by Thai military doing any buying or trading, or even just leaving the camp, they would be beaten and sometimes shot.

My mother lost faith in Buddhism for a while, since she had lost so many loved ones because of all the bad things that had happened, and she faulted the religion. She started attending the Christian church, along with many of her new friends. She was very active in the church, and tried to get me to attend with her. I could have, I suppose, but I was busy learning English and other lessons at school, was involved with other activities, and my new life, in general. Since I wouldn't attend church with her and continued to go to the temple, she was so upset that she refused to speak to me for a full year!

During this time, Thavy gave birth to her first son, Somnang, which translates as "lucky." Even though Khao-I-Dang Camp was designed to accommodate at least 200,000 people, thousands of refugees arrived on any given day, so it filled to capacity quickly. Since the camp was now full, Thavy and her little family were sent to another camp. Mom sent Sopheak there to help her, since she was now pregnant with her second child.

It still feels almost overwhelming whenever I think about the magnitude of the international humanitarian response to our plight. I am so grateful. Even to this day, I get animated whenever I think back about

the time I spent at this camp. I wish I could go back there to visit, but the population became less and less as people were relocated, and it was closed in 1993. I heard that it was later burned down.

THE AMAZING PATTY WESTERBEKE

Who would have the guts and desire to travel so far away to volunteer to work with the Red Cross at Khao-I-Dang? Fifty-something Patty Westerbeke, that's who. Normally, it would not be easy for someone her age to be allowed to just hop on over and lend a hand, but she was able to pull some strings, partly because her husband was a colonel in the military. She and her family owned the Westerbeke Ranch and Resort just outside of the small town of Sonoma, California. Patty didn't speak Khmer, of course, so two brothers at the camp, Somourn and Soman, translated for her. She eventually sponsored them, as well as their spouses and children, to come to Sonoma and live at the ranch until they could get set up to live on their own. Remember Saream's cousin and our good friend Pen Lang who had lost her husband and children in the war? She was related somehow to the two brothers that Patty sponsored, and after they got settled in, Patty decided to sponsor Pen Lang, her sister, and brother-in-law. Pen Lang sent us letters telling us we should try to come to Sonoma. We saw many people being sponsored and leaving for different countries, and people in the various agencies encouraged us to apply for sponsorship, too. Some Cambodians we

knew at the camp told us not to apply because “You don’t speak the language” or “It’s cold there.” There were so many unknowns, and they told us that it might be worse in a new place, but what could be worse than coming from hell? My father decided to fill out the application requesting sponsorship to the United States. He had to write an essay including such things as military history, previous teaching jobs, and details about his family. He had to list all family members with date of birth. Friends told him to put down a younger age for himself to “make yourself more marketable” and increase the chance of getting accepted. He chose to be honest. He did, however, have to make up some of our birth dates. As you may remember, all of our birth certificates had been destroyed to try to keep us safer from the Khmer Rouge knowing too much about us. My parents remembered the month and year of each of our births, but they weren’t sure about the day, so for our application they chose to make the day we were born agree with our birth month, so it would be easier to remember. Mom’s birth date became 1/1/____ (with the correct year filled in). This same pattern was used for all of us kids. I was born in December, so my birthday became 12/12.

A big bulletin board posted the names of head of household when applications were approved, and after several months, we were so happy to see Dad’s name on the list. We had been approved to come to the United States! There were many sponsoring agencies, and our family was selected by a Catholic organization. The sponsoring organization had the responsibility of finding lodging and employment. We were given the choice of where we wanted to go, and since Patty agreed to take us in at her ranch, we decided to go there.

TRANSITION CAMP

Within two weeks of our acceptance, a bus came to take us to “Transition Camp,” where we stayed for three or four months. There were about twenty big, long buildings in groups of four with a “Wellness Center” in the middle of each. Our routines there were much the same as Khao-I-Dang, but activities were more structured. We were also allowed to go to the beach sometimes, but we were strictly supervised by the Thai military, which made it less fun. Still, there was lots of happy splashing in the water—which I had to watch from the sand because I got severe hives whenever I went in the water.

Some people who had been accepted changed their minds about wanting to go, so they sold their name to someone else who got to go in their place. The immigration officials caught on to this pretty quickly, and required all family members to go to a face-to-face interview. They asked each of us a few basic questions, like our name and age. All answers had to agree with what Dad had put down on the application. I remember having to borrow a friend’s flip flops to wear to the interview because my shoes got lost and Mom refused to buy me another pair.

We also had to have our blood drawn for lab tests and undergo a physical examination. I remember standing in line, wrapped in a sarong

with nothing on underneath. When it was my turn, I went into the room where there were three Thai nurses and was told to stand in the middle of the room and “drop it.” They had me turn around and just looked, without any touching. It felt so humiliating. Everyone in my family passed, so we were allowed to go on to the next camp. Refugees couldn’t go on to the next camp if they didn’t pass the physical, were about to give birth, had a baby with health problems, or “failed” the immigration questions.

TOUGH AS NAILS

So here we are, about to leave to start our new life. But how did we make it this far? I really believe that most of the credit has to go to my mom, a true Superwoman—and not just by virtue of giving birth to nine children—who did whatever she felt she had to do for our safety and ultimate survival. There were so many obstacles and unknowns, yet she kept pushing forward. She was courageous. She was determined. Do not judge her harshly for any mistakes she may have made along the way. We do the best we can at any given time, including times of extreme stress. My gratitude to her goes on forever.

BIG IRON BIRD

Three days before departing to start our new lives, we were loaded on a bus and taken to a camp near Bangkok, which was a short drive from the airport. It was very crowded with only a tarp separating Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese families, all waiting for their plane out. When it was our turn, they took us to board a huge Pan American plane. On board, people were quiet, not knowing what was ahead, but there were lots of smiles of excitement.

Even though the flight attendants didn't speak our language, they did funny things to try to distract the children on the long flight. We loved being waited on, which was a completely new experience for us. I was quickly learning the definition of culture shock. When dinner was served, there was a foil pack containing a moist towelette on the tray. Dad thought it was type of hors d'oeuvre since it looked like our noodles do before they are cut, and he put it in his mouth and started chewing on it. Mom gave him a quick slap.

Mothers were holding their bare-bottomed babies. The flight attendants looked a bit horrified and quickly passed out Pampers, but since those diapers were something they had never seen before, the new moms thought they were hats, and put them on their own heads to help

them keep warm, as the plane was air conditioned— also new to us all.

WELCOME TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The plane refueled in Japan, then went on to Oakland, California. When we deplaned on that chilly October night in 1981, volunteers handed each of us a huge jacket and an ID card with our picture and a number. I had not yet turned nineteen.

Everyone was taken by bus to Hamilton Field, which had previously been a military base and was located on the outskirts of the city of Novato. Those not making their new homes in California would be taken back to the airport the next day for their onward flights to other destinations, including Texas and New York City.

Even though I was exhausted from the long trip, I remember being mesmerized and excited going over the Richmond Bridge at night and seeing other bridges all lit up and the lights of San Francisco off in the distance.

OUR NEW LIFE

Patty Westerbeke, our sponsor who we had heard so much about, came to pick up my family after breakfast in the morning. Even though she had a van, we were packed tightly, some of us sitting on the floor. The small town of Sonoma was way smaller back then, very rural with lots of farms, and not nearly as many vineyards as today. Patty's ranch and resort were outside of town. At first, I felt very disappointed, thinking, *Why am I here? I want to be in that city with all those pretty lights.* Not much time to think about that—we were grateful to be free and in America, and started working very hard right away, cleaning guest cabins, cooking, doing dishes, laundry, and working in the garden.

We stayed in the guest house where Pen Lang lived with her sister and brother-in-law. Some of the good memories from so long ago came back to me when Pen Lang made us cabbage salad, a treat we used to have for special occasions.

After only being there for about a week, Patty loaded all of us kids back into the van and took us to school. Vibol, Sopheak, and I were all placed together at the high school in 9th grade.

We managed to survive the first day with just a few embarrassments. Not knowing any better, I walked right into the boys'

locker room, looking for my brother. I was also wearing men's pants (that I had chosen at the thrift store where we were each allowed to pick out two shirts and two pairs of pants for free). And poor Sokhomal got on the school bus wearing pajamas, having no idea that people had different clothes for different things.

That first year, we had several English as a Second Language classes every day, and also P.E., math and typing. (By the next year, we knew enough to get by, and were mainstreamed into the 10th grade.)

Patty drove us to the welfare office in Santa Rosa to sign up for food stamps. Passing apple orchards on the way, she pulled over and had us gather up apples that had fallen on the ground. This was the first time we had ever even seen an apple. What an experience that was!

Patty helped us find our first apartment and taught us how to pay rent.

She chose the First Baptist Church for us to attend, and dropped us off there regularly.

We started going places on our old, dilapidated, donated bikes. They broke down a lot, but luckily, we had a nice neighbor, Jerry, who helped us fix them.

LUCILLE

Another godsend was an incredible woman by the name of Lucille McCarthy, who was dropped into our lives. She was in her early 60's, had never married, and had recently retired from teaching. She saw us walking by her house on school days on our way to the bus stop. One day she came out of her house and asked us where we were from. After this, Lucille picked us up at our apartment almost daily—all seven of us kids squeezed into her little two-door sedan—and took us to the library to study and answer our questions. She was instrumental in helping me succeed in school. I truly believe that I wouldn't have graduated without her help. She also took us on many fun outings, like to the zoo, on picnics, and we also learned the local history by visiting places like General Vallejo's home and Jack London's ranch. I was thrilled to get to sit next to her in the front seat with Kosal on my lap. I always referred to dear Lucille as my adopted god-mom, and it was very hard on me when she passed away.

THANK YOU, MR. PRESIDENT

At some point, to show his gratitude to President Reagan for allowing our family to come here, my father started sending him cash through the mail—even if it was just \$2 at a time. In return, he received back “signed” thank-you letters from the President, which he proudly framed and displayed.

WORKING GIRL

After school, I worked as a Certified Nursing Assistant at a local nursing home. I haven't been in one recently, but back then, you were hit with all sorts of bad smells just walking into the building. I didn't like working there.

I started working for Patty's daughter-in-law a couple months after we arrived. I shopped, cooked, and did housekeeping for her, and then also worked as a nanny when she gave birth to Julia—which I continued for 13 years!

I also worked part-time at a store downtown that sold home supplies.

I found a way to fit these jobs in around going to school. After graduation from high school at age 22, I then got my certification as an electronic technician from the community college. There were no more jobs in this field when I graduated, so I went to work as a nursing assistant at Sonoma Valley Hospital.

OLD MAID

Sopheak fell in love with one of her co-workers and was determined to marry him. Even though arranged marriages are part of our culture, my parents reluctantly gave her permission. She got married in December of 1985, the same year we had both graduated from high school.

It is also part of our culture for children to get married in order of their birth, so not only was I considered an “old maid” at the ripe old age of 23, but now the rules of our culture had been violated, and Mom was desperate to get me married quickly. One of her friends told her about an available man she knew who lived in Portland. His name was Var, and he had come to this country with a family who had lost their son. He had to take the son’s name and date of birth as listed on their application. The next thing I knew, Mom told me that a nice man was coming to visit, and I was married in June of 1986. Mom told me that there was no choice—that it was a “must.”

LAKE ILSANJO

Who could ever imagine that this beautiful, serene lake would become a place of incomprehensible grief?

Our “baby” brother was about to graduate from 8th grade, and part of his class went there for their end-of-year celebratory trip. This lake is located in a remote area deep within a big state park. It is NOT a swimming lake, and I will never understand why the adults let the kids go in the water.

That afternoon I answered the knock on the door, and Kosal’s principal and a counselor were standing there. They had us sit down, and then they told us that there had been an accident. They said that Kosal was missing, but that they were looking for him. Panic ensued in our household. Mom passed out and we had to call 9-1-1. I called Var at work and sent him to look for Kosal. Later that evening, we got a phone call telling us that a diver had found Kosal’s body in the lake. My sweet brother had been taken from us forever.

His classmates made a beautiful poster for us, and we found out how well-liked this shy boy was. We learned that he had really wanted to go on the other class trip to Yosemite the same time as the trip to the lake, but he didn’t want to ask Mom and Dad for the extra money it

would cost.

He was such a good kid. He would babysit his nieces and nephews, do his homework, and watch cartoons on TV at the same time. He was a smart kid and got good grades. I remember that he came to me about a week before this tragedy and talked to me about what courses he should sign up to take in high school. I was devastated by his loss even more because I hadn't gotten to tell him goodbye that morning, as I usually did. I had worked the night before and was sleeping when he left. I miss him and wonder what his life would be like now, thirty-one years later, if he had lived.

AND THEN YOU CAME ALONG

In 1988, I was blessed with the birth of my first daughter, Justina. I got pregnant again in 1995 while I was in nursing school. All the tough things I experienced in Cambodia contributed to my determination to always try to better myself and never give up—so I did not drop out, but I did miss one day of school when I gave birth to Alexis.

And so, dear daughters, this seems to be a good place to end my story, since I wrote it primarily for you, and you know the rest. In terms of the future ... well, we will just have to wait to see what it holds.

OH, AND ONE MORE THING

I'm happy to report that Mom, at 82 years young, is still going strong. Don't mess with her, because she will still come out on top.

EPILOGUE

Have you ever wondered why you happened to be born into a particular set of circumstances? There are many unanswerable questions that have gone through my mind. *Why was I born in Cambodia and to these people who are my parents? Why did my family and I have to suffer through so much?"*

Most of my questions revolve around the good circumstances that transpired in my life, though. I wonder why I survived while millions did not. The majority of those who survived still remain in Cambodia, a country without war now, but one that is filled with many poor people who still have to struggle daily with ongoing hardships. A scenario I think about is that I could have survived but not have been able to leave, and had to raise my children there in poverty and without being able to give them the opportunity for a good education or the choice to do absolutely anything they wanted with their lives. Why was my family chosen to not only come to the United States, but also to have been able to choose Sonoma, California, as their home? It has been my heaven on earth.

I have been given many gifts, and because of the gift of survival, you, my two precious daughters, exist. I love you more than you will ever know.

AFTERWARD

You may have noticed that this is mostly a factual account and doesn't go into a lot of feelings. I don't quite know how to explain it—I didn't have an absence of feelings, but that part of my heart must have been numbed during those horrific times that are truly beyond comprehension. I was totally focused on just trying to stay alive. It was a constant struggle trying not to die from starvation, disease, exhaustion, or getting killed by the Khmer Rouge. Humans' most basic need is for physical survival, and I was stuck at the bottom of this hierarchy of basic needs for many years.

It has been very difficult for me to think about what I experienced during my childhood. The more I thought, talked, and wrote about it, the more details that came flooding back to the forefront of my mind. It has caused me to have sleepless nights all over again. I didn't realize, however, that getting all those suppressed memories out would also have such a considerable therapeutic effect on my healing process. Now I accept that I will never be fully healed. The grief and sadness I feel from some of the memories seems to weigh less heavily on me now, though. My mind is so much clearer and I feel freer and more at peace than I have ever been.

SUMMARY OF THE CAMBODIAN CIVIL WAR

Over the years, I have studied and tried to make sense of all this. I have not been successful. There is no sense in war. There is no sense in genocide.

Details are complicated and vary, depending on the source. I have done my best to write a brief summary that may lend itself to a better understanding of my story.

In the mid-60's, the Kingdom of Cambodia was led by Prince Norodom Sihanouk. He was liked by many, partly because he led the country to independence from France. His views were more aligned with the Communist Party, while the Prime Minister, Lon Nol, favored the ideas of Western culture.

The Khmer Rouge was an extreme communist group. In addition to the belief of a classless society with the government owning and controlling everything, they had a racial emphasis on national purity. Certain religions were also targeted. They first started to build up their army in the jungles in the late 60's supported by the North Vietnamese Army and a communist political organization in Laos.

In March of 1970, Lon Nol initiated a military coup when Prince Sihanouk was out of the country. The 1,168-year-old Khmer Dynasty was toppled and the Khmer Republic was declared. Civil war then broke out. Prince Sihanouk allied himself with the Khmer Rouge (which helped them to gain increasing support) and North Vietnam, while the

new Republic was backed by the U.S. and South Vietnam.

Under the leadership of Pol Pot, a strictly agricultural society was created. People were forced to work on collective farms. In April of 1975, the Khmer Rouge took control of the capital city of Phnom Penh. They immediately forcibly evacuated the 2.5 million residents there and in other urban areas. If former government workers, doctors, teachers, and other professionals were lucky enough to avoid being executed because of being viewed as a threat to the new government, they were also forced to work in the fields as a re-education process. Those who seemed to be intellectuals of any sort, perhaps because they wore glasses or knew a foreign language, were also killed. This regime controlled all aspects of life. It was illegal to own private property, money, or jewelry. Most reading material and religion were also outlawed. There were strict rules about vocabulary and clothing. Children were forced into the military.

In June of 1979 the Vietnamese captured Phnom Penh and quickly destroyed most of the Khmer Rouge Army. Pol Pot was forced back to the jungle where he resumed guerilla operations.

In the nearly four years that the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia, roughly 25 percent of the population died as a result of mass killings, malnutrition, strenuous working conditions, and poor medical care.

