

Khmer Rouge victim from San Jose was saved by her children
Joe Rodriguez
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The most surprising thing about Sophany Bay is how much at peace she looks. The nightmares haven't tortured her delicate face or turned her hands shaky. Dressed in a purple blazer and silk scarf, she looks every bit a professional and educated woman, the kind who were not supposed to survive the killing fields of Cambodia.

"The only reason I am here today is because my children saved me," Bay said at the Wat Khemara Rangsey Buddhist temple in East San Jose. She tapped her shoulders for emphasis and added, "My children, they would not tell the Khmer Rouge who their father was, who their grandfather was. I would have been executed immediately."

On Saturday, the 63-year-old will join dozens of local Cambodians invited to the temple to tell their stories of surviving one of the 21st century's worst genocides. Human rights activists and university researchers will collect their testimony and, as part of a national effort, send their accounts to an international tribunal judging the acts of four Khmer Rouge leaders. The tribunal hasn't yet decided if it will use these testimonials in its deliberations.

"This is a fitting time for their stories to be heard, whether or not the tribunal will accept the testimony," says Leakhena Nou, a medical sociologist at California State University-Long Beach and one of the key organizers of the testimonial campaign. In studying the lingering emotional damage of the murderous social engineering inflicted on Cambodian immigrants in the 1970s, she has found that even their American-born children can feel stigmatized, isolated, depressed and suspicious of government and police.

"They're not getting healthier," Nou said. "They're getting sicker. Why is this happening with all the health services here?" The answer to that question won't come any time soon, but it never will if the mass murder is forgotten, or worse, denied by tyrants today and in the future.

Brutal regime

Bay grew up in Kompong Chuang, a small fishing village, with her five siblings, policeman father and stay-at-home mom. Growing up, she dreamed of becoming a judge.

"Even as a little girl in a village, I saw there was no justice at all in society," she remembered. "But for some reason, God changed my plan." Instead, she became a schoolteacher after college and moved to the capital, Phnom Penh. There she met and fell for a young Cambodian army officer, whom she married in 1966. They started a family.

Meanwhile, the Vietnam War raged next door and would soon spill into Cambodia, giving the fanatical ultra-communist Khmer Rouge an opening. They toppled the government in 1975 intent on building a communist utopia from scratch. To do this they would purge the population of intellectuals, former government officials, policemen, lawyers, journalists and anyone else deemed a threat to their revolution. Bay was lucky in one way — her husband had been sent to the United States for training one year earlier.

He was safe, but he would not know what horrors awaited his wife and their three young kids.

What Bay remembers from the day the Khmer Rouge took control were the gunshots in the morning.

"They kept firing into the air, telling everyone, 'Go, go, go!' into the forest, that the Americans were going to bomb the city."

She grabbed her 6-year-old son, Paul; her 5-year-old daughter, Pine; and 2-month-old baby girl, Pom. Escorted by Khmer Rouge soldiers, they marched until exhausted, and again for days, deeper into the country.

One day, she lifted her emaciated, sick baby to a soldier and pleaded for help. "The soldier, he injected something into her head," Bay remembered. "She died immediately. She was so happy and beautiful before, my baby." She buried Pom that night. But her two older children kept leaving the camp to visit Pom's grave. Fearing this would anger the soldiers, Bay escaped with them but was caught and sent to a forced-labor camp.

To root out their enemies, soldiers often interrogated children while their parents worked in the fields, irrigation ditches or rock quarries.

At night, Bay would whisper instructions to Paul and Pine.

"When the soldiers ask you about your father," Bay urged, "tell them he was a teacher like me. Do not tell them he is in the army."

Roughly 2 million Cambodians were starved, executed or worked to death by the Khmer Rouge. Bay isn't sure how her son and daughter died, from starvation, beatings, torture, or some combination. "They tied my son's hands and made him stand in water up to his waist," Bay said. "They asked him questions. 'Who is your mother? Who is your father?'"

Paul died at age 7. Bay's daughter, Pine, died soon after. She had been caught scavenging for food left by soldiers and then beaten. Bay can still hear her final words: "Mom, take me to the clinic. When does father come home? You have to look for him, Mom!"

Life struggles

Vietnam, itself a communist state, finally invaded Cambodia and deposed the Khmer Rouge in 1979. Bay didn't think life under the Vietnamese would be any better, so she fled through the jungle to Thailand, eating tree leaves and remembering a friend's advice in camp.

"Life is a struggle," Bay quoted her. "I kept thinking that life is always going to be a struggle, and that's what kept me alive." After 10 months in a refugee camp, where she used her French to become a relief worker, she was reunited with her husband. By then blood clots in his brain had left him partially paralyzed. Everyone in their immediate families had died. After all these years, Bay still suffers from occasional nightmares.

Today she's a mental health counselor with the Gardner Family Health Network in San Jose, a nonprofit clinic where she helps low-income Cambodians. Her husband is a medical technician at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center, a public hospital. They had no more children.

Three decades later, many Cambodians who survived the Khmer Rouge will not testify out of fear or the pain of memory. "I am not scared," Bay said. "If I don't see justice done, I will not be able to close my eyes when I die. I try to be courageous about it, to talk about it, to let the world know the story of the Cambodian killing fields."

The teacher, mother and survivor who once wanted to become a judge still wants her day in court.

A Time for justice

Testimonies from Cambodian survivors of the Khmer Rouge will be taken from 1 to 6 p.m. Saturday and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday at Wat Khemara Rangsey temple, 1594 Cunningham Ave., San Jose. For more information go to www.apa.nyu.edu/. Click on "research," then "special projects."