

For one child of survivors, Cambodian killings resemble Shoah
FIRST PERSON
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BANGKOK, April 16 (JTA) — As someone who lost practically his entire family to the Holocaust, I came to regard the Holocaust as the ultimate benchmark for mass murder. Any subsequent 20th-century genocides seemed merely sad reminders that the post-Holocaust pledge “Never again” was just an empty promise.

Tuol Sleng is Cambodia’s version of Auschwitz. I found seeing Tuol Seng not only a harrowing experience but an eye-opener of the similarities between the two killings.

Outside Tuol Sleng, or “Poison Tree Hill,” ragged little children chase a football while a small girl savors a vanilla ice cream. Like over half of Cambodians, they were born after the Khmer Rouge genocide and probably don’t know why this former school has been turned into a museum.

The three-story, horseshoe-shaped building with open-air corridors resembles any high school in Southeast Asia. Once it was anything but. Here, even courtyard trees take on sinister connotations: Perhaps people were spread-eagled to branches and flayed alive.

Now Tuol Sleng is painfully personalizing this formerly abstract tragedy. A former Khmer Rouge prison, the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes was once known as Prison S-21.

In a room left as Vietnamese troops found it in 1979 after driving Pol Pot and his thugs back into the jungles, stains still blacken the walls around a metal bed hooked up to electric prods under a large photograph of a burnt victim, the last to die here after no doubt “confessing” to being an “imperialist stooge” recruited by the CIA to undermine Cambodia’s new people’s paradise. Rule No. 6 of the Security Regulations displayed at the door declares: “While getting lashes or electrification you must not cry at all.”

While their end results were similar, the Holocaust and Cambodia’s Killing Fields were motivated by different ideologies. One was the industrialized, systematic mass murder of a people purely for ethnic reasons with a concomitant attempt to erase an entire, millennia-old religious culture from the face of the earth; the other saw millions of helpless Cambodians clobbered and starved to death fairly randomly by their indoctrinated compatriots who often came from the same village, by virtue of being “enemies of the revolution.”

Yet the Holocaust and the Killing Fields had this much in common: Not only did both the Holocaust and the Khmer Rouge genocide obliterate the lives of the murdered, but they have also irretrievably destroyed civilizations.

The Nazis' mass murder of Jews is singular among modern genocides in that beyond exterminating 6 million Jews with industrial efficiency, it destroyed a distinct civilization in the process — that of Eastern European Jewry.

Cambodia's own holocaust came close. With a back-to-basics agrarian utopia in mind, Pol Pot set about eliminating all traces of culture and urbanity from Khmer society. Monks, teachers, doctors, lawyers and intellectuals — anyone with spectacles qualified — were butchered, in a civilization that produced the renowned Angkor Wat temple complex dating from the Middle Ages. It was no accident that the school of Toul Sleng was turned into the regime's most notorious slaughterhouse.

Covering the walls in two ground-floor rooms are snapshots. With Gestapo-like efficiency, Khmer Rouge guards took pictures of their victims, men, women, even children — often whole “enemy” families. Most stare back frightened, many dumbstruck, some resigned, a few defiant. The photos' original purpose was to humiliate. Yet with their help the victims, individually and collectively, have defied their murderers: Although they went to their death nameless, they haven't remained faceless.

Past classrooms were turned into torture chambers honeycombed with makeshift brick coops containing iron shackles. A gruesome gallery of oil paintings provides an eyewitness account of how inmates met their ends. Left behind by Vann Nath, one of seven survivors out of some 16,000 prisoners, the paintings' childish perspectives make them all the more poignant.

Vann Nath has done for the Killing Fields what Art Spiegelman, in his comic book “Maus: A Survivor's Tale,” has done for the Holocaust: show horror through the eyes of an innocent. In one painting, guards in the Khmer Rouge's trademark black pajamas and checkered scarves wrench the fingernails of their captive with pliers; in another, they cudgel a man to death with bamboo sticks; in a third, they dip a prisoner headfirst into an oil drum of acid.

Mounted on a wall in another room is a large map of Cambodia fashioned from human skulls and dissected diagonally by a stylized Mekong painted blood red. Nothing could better encapsulate the Killing Fields. Between 1975 and 1979 — or Year Zero to Year Four in their reckoning — Pol

Pot, or Brother No. 1, and his illiterate peasant boys transformed the country into a countrywide death chamber.

He who kills one soul kills an entire world, Judaism stresses. Khmer Rouge executioners did their work well. They killed some 1.7 million Cambodians, or nearly a quarter of the population. It was a national disaster that approached the Holocaust in its quantitative magnitude.

Though Pol Pot died in 1998, his bloody handprints continue to bedevil Cambodia, in its enduring poverty and lawlessness. Outside the museum, maimed beggars plead for loose change. While several Khmer Rouge stalwarts laze about in retirement in baronial mansions, landmines littering the countryside continue to claim daily victims from among the downtrodden.

Yet life goes on. A comparatively upscale neighborhood encroaches on the museum's barbed-wire perimeters. A guesthouse has sprouted opposite the museum's gate.

The Cambodian government occasionally pledges to bring Khmer Rouge leaders to trial, but it seems doubtful that the Cambodians' aggressors will be brought to justice.

Nonetheless, survivors and relatives can exact their own measure of justice through remembrance of the victims and appropriate public testimonials. Perhaps that's why Cambodian scholars and nonprofits have turned to Yad Vashem and Holocaust museums in the United States for inspiration in creating their own memorials. Sadly, the Cambodian memorial project remains perennially bedeviled by severe cash restraints.

That said, in one of the world's poorest countries, any funds collected for a fitting museum could be much better spent on improving the lives of Cambodians. The Khmer Rouge, like the Nazis before them, may have killed the past and blighted the present for millions of innocents, but Cambodian survivors, like Jews now prospering again, must be allowed to reclaim the future.