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A Man Who Knew How Precious Life and Liberty Are

By Lawrence Reed

A television audience estimated in the millions will feast on the glitz and glamour of Hollywood when the 79th Annual Academy Awards are bestowed on February 25, 2007. To an awful lot of people, it matters whether "Babel" beats "The Queen" or Helen noses out Meryl, but it makes no difference to me. My thoughts will be elsewhere that Sunday night - on a friend who won an Oscar 22 years ago.

On the night of the 57th Oscars in 1985, "Amadeus" claimed Best Picture; F. Murray Abraham won for best actor; Sally Field, for best actress. Then came the announcement of the winner of the award for best supporting actor. To the stage bearing the widest grin of his life bounced a man few Americans had ever heard of. He had acted in only one motion picture. He had been trained as a physician in his native Cambodia, where he had witnessed unspeakable cruelty and endured torture before escaping and finding his way to America barely five years earlier. He was Dr. Haing S. Ngor.

Ngor's Oscar-winning performance in "The Killing Fields" gave him the platform to tell the world about the mass murder that occurred between 1975 and 1979 in Cambodia at the hands of the Khmer Rouge communists. When I met Ngor at a conference in Dallas a few months after Oscar night, I was struck by the intensity of his passion. Perhaps no one loves liberty more than one who has been denied it at the point of a gun. We became instant friends and stayed in frequent contact. When he decided to visit Cambodia in August 1989 for the first time since his escape 10 years before, he asked me to go with him. Dith Pran, the photographer Ngor portrayed in the movie, was among the small number in our entourage. So were Diane Sawyer and a crew from ABC's "Prime Time Live." Experiencing Cambodia with Ngor and Pran so soon after the genocide left me with vivid impressions and lasting memories.

But Cambodia in 1989 was still a universe away from the Cambodia of 1979. In spite of the country's continued suffering on a grand scale, I knew it was a playground compared to the three and a half years that Ngor and Pran lived through and miraculously survived.

During that time, crazed but battle-hardened and jungle-toughened revolutionaries who had seized power in 1975 set about to remake Cambodian society. Their leader, Pol Pot, embraced the most radical versions of class warfare, egalitarianism and state control. His model was

the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Mao and Stalin were his heroes. In the warped minds of Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge hierarchy, the "evils" they aspired to destroy included all vestiges of the former governments of Cambodia, city life, private enterprise, the family unit, religion, money, modern medicine and industry, private property and anything that smacked of foreign influence. They savaged an essentially defenseless population already weary of war. The Khmer Rouge killing machine produced the killing fields for which the film was later named.

Indicative of the ultraradicalism of the Pol Pot regime, 1975 was no longer 1975 in Cambodia. It was declared to be "Year Zero," and the numbering of succeeding years would follow accordingly. The name of the country was changed to Kampuchea. Racial pogroms, political executions and random homicides were instituted as public policy in order to discipline, frighten and reorganize society. Any one individual's life meant nothing in the grand scheme of the new order.

One day after taking power, the Khmer Rouge forcibly evacuated the populations of all urban areas, including the capital, Phnom Penh, a city swollen by refugees to at least 2 million inhabitants. Many thousands of men, women, the sick, the elderly and the handicapped died on the way to their "political rehabilitation" in the countryside. Survivors found themselves slaving away at the most grueling toil in the rice fields, often separated from their families, routinely beaten and tortured for trifling offenses or for no reason at all, kept hungry by meager rations and facing certain death for the slightest challenge to authority.

Thon Hin, a top official in the Cambodian foreign ministry at the time of our 1989 visit, told me of the propaganda blasted daily from speakers as citizens labored in the fields: "They said that everything belonged to the State, that we had no duty to anything but the State, that the State would always make the right decisions for the good of everyone. I remember so many times they would say, 'It is always better to kill by mistake than to not kill at all.'"

Churches and pagodas were demolished and thousands of Buddhist monks and worshippers were murdered. Schools were closed down and modern medicine forbidden in favor of quack remedies and sinister experimentation. By 1979, only 45 doctors remained alive in the whole country; more than 4,000 had perished or had fled the country. Eating in private and scavenging for food were considered crimes against the State. So was wearing eyeglasses, which was seen as evidence that one had read too much.

With total control of information and communication, Pol Pot's killers kept the Cambodian people unaware of the full extent of the state's atrocities. Most had little idea that the horror they were witnessing was a

nationwide event. The rest of the world knew even less. Mass graves unearthed in later years provided belated and grisly evidence of the violence.

During our 1989 tour, Ngor and I visited Tuol Sleng. It was a former high school in Phnom Penh, converted by the Khmer Rouge into a torture center. Of 20,000 men, women and children taken there, only seven survived. Hideous devices and copious amounts of dried blood on the floors were still present for visitors to see. The walls were lined with snapshots of the hapless victims - pictures taken by their very captors.

Fifteen kilometers away we visited a place called Choeung Ek, where a memorial now houses more than 8,000 human skulls, all of which were found in an adjacent field. Cambodians say that nearby streams once ran so red with blood that cattle would not drink from the water.

Early estimates of the death toll from starvation, disease and execution during Pol Pot's tyranny range as high as 3 million - in a nation of only 8 million inhabitants when he took power. Most now put the figure in the neighborhood of 2 million deaths. Whatever the actual number, it is certain that Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge was responsible for far more deaths than even the 1.2 million who perished on both the American and Vietnamese sides during the last decade of the Vietnam War.

Haing Ngor didn't just see these things, he endured them. He had to get rid of his eyeglasses and disappear as a doctor. He reappeared as a cab driver, hoping he and his wife would not draw the attention of the Khmer Rouge. Nonetheless, on more than one occasion, he fell prey to their brutality. In one torturous episode, one of his fingers was sliced off. In another, his wife died in his arms from complications during childbirth. Ngor's skills as a physician might have saved her, but he knew if he revealed he was a doctor they both would have been executed on the spot.

In his riveting 1987 autobiography, "Survival in the Killing Fields," he sketched his anguish in print: "The wind brought me her last words again and again: 'Take care of yourself, sweet.' She had taken care of me when I was sick. She had saved my life. But when it was my turn to save her, I failed." He eventually escaped Cambodia through Thailand, landing in America in 1980, a year and a half after a Vietnamese invasion ended the Khmer Rouge regime.

Haing Ngor believed the world must know these things, fully and graphically. When fate led to a chance to act in a movie about the period, he grabbed it and performed brilliantly. He deserved the Oscar it earned him, even though he often said that he really didn't have to "act." He had personally suffered through calamities much worse than those depicted in the

film. He was driven to do well so that the rest of us would remember what happened and those to whom it happened.

After "The Killing Fields," Haing earned a little money here and there in film from cameo appearances and bit parts. He lived in a modest apartment on Beaudry Avenue in Los Angeles. He was too busy helping others and educating audiences about the catastrophe in his homeland to make a career in Hollywood. He frequently volunteered for weeks at a time to provide free medical assistance to refugees along the Thai border. I remained in touch with him in the years after our 1989 visit to Cambodia. He always had time for his friends, and I brought him to my town of Midland, Mich., in 1991 to speak to a local assembly.

Then one cold morning in February 1996, Stu Frohm of the Midland Daily News called my office. He had just seen a wire report and wanted my comment. Dr. Haing S. Ngor had been shot and killed the day before - not somewhere in southeast Asia, but in downtown Los Angeles. The perpetrators, it turned out, were ordinary gang thugs trying to rob him as he got out of his car. They took a locket which held the only picture he still had of his deceased wife.

It's impossible to make sense out of a senseless tragedy. I do know this, however: For Haing Ngor, rediscovering his freedom after experiencing hell on Earth wasn't enough. He couldn't relax, breathe sighs of relief or resume living a quiet or anonymous life. He felt compelled to tell his story so others would know what awful things total government can do. He forced us to ponder and appreciate life more fundamentally than ever before.

Enjoy the Oscars on February 25. We should be grateful we live in a country where we can celebrate our creative achievements in film. But we should be even more thankful for people like Haing Ngor, who did more to educate for liberty in a few short years than most people who take their liberty for granted will ever do in their lifetimes.