



## GENOCIDE IN CAMBODIA:

# Through the eyes of a survivor

***“Cambodia become a country that was a prison – all be it without walls. And all its seven million citizens were prisoners in this country, where one by one, day by day, moment by moment our rights would be taken from us.”***<sup>[1]</sup>

Loung Ung’s words speak to her very personal experience as well as that of thousands of others and, when placed within the broader historical context, help to underscore the human experience of this dark period of history. Loung was just five years old when the communist Khmer Rouge soldiers evicted her and her family from their home in Phnom Penh and her young life was shattered. Between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge was responsible for the death – through torture, disease, forced labour, starvation, and murder – of an estimated two million Cambodians, almost a quarter of the country’s population. Among the victims were Loung’s parents, two sisters, and twenty other relatives.<sup>[2]</sup>

under King Sihanouk, during a time when the Cold War was escalating and the world was becoming more polarized. While Cambodia tried to remain neutral, Vietnam was divided into a Communist north and a pro-Western south.<sup>[4]</sup> Thousands of refugees fled the war in Vietnam (1955 – 1975) into Cambodia, destabilising the country even further.

From 1964, the United States became involved in the war between North and South Vietnam; fighting against the North in an attempt to prevent the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. North Vietnamese (Viet Cong) guerrilla bases, that were set up along the border of South Vietnam and Cambodia, were supplied with food and military goods by what became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. A section of these tracks ran from North Vietnam through Cambodian territory on its way to the eastern border.<sup>[5]</sup>

*“Cambodia become a country that was a prison – all be it without walls.”*

Cambodia’s political landscape, leading up to the mass atrocities and genocide,<sup>[3]</sup> was turbulent. Cambodia was colonised by France for decades, occupied by Japan during World War II and gained independence in 1953,



Loung Ung, activist, author, lecturer and spokesperson Cambodia ([blueandgoldonline.org](http://blueandgoldonline.org)).

1) Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, YouTube (Aug 31, 2021). *First They Killed my Father: A daughter of Cambodia Remembers* [video]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjFLzCf39sg>

2) *Luong Ung’s Biography*. Luong Ung: Writer, Speaker, Activist. <https://www.loungung.com/>

3) In 2018, two of the nine accused persons before the ECC (Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia), Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan, were convicted of crimes against humanity and genocide, for killing members of the Vietnamese and Cham groups.

Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, Cases. <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en>

4) USHMM Genocide Prevention, Country Case studies: *Cambodia, An Ancient Kingdom Enters Dangerous Times*. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/an-ancient-kingdom>

5) Bophana Center, Khmer Rouge History [iPhone App], *1966 The War in Vietnam Enters Cambodia*.



**Ung family in Cambodia, 1975. Photo courtesy of Loung Ung (Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle)**

In an attempt to disrupt this line, President Nixon secretly ordered US Air Forces to launch an extensive bombing campaign of the region in 1969, exacting a heavy toll amongst combatants and civilians alike. The campaign destroyed bridges, villages, factories and farmland, killing between 50 000 and 150 000 people and forcing over two million people to flee their homes to escape the bombing, ground fighting, and communist rule. Most ended up in the increasingly crowded Phnom Penh and other provincial cities.[6]

In March the following year, Sihanouk was overthrown by the pro-American General Lon Nol, and other opponents. This led to a civil war between American-backed Lon Nol and communist Khmer Rouge, the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), who were inspired by Maoist ideology and relied on China for support and weapons. The Khmer Rouge's communism called for a radical transformation of the Cambodian economy; brutally enforcing the ideals of a classless, agrarian society, including the abolishment of private property,



**Map shows supply lines and military sanctuaries of Communist Vietnam in Cambodia, 1969 - 1970 (Khmer Rouge History App)**

religious practices, schooling, money and the rejection of urban or western ideas.[7]

The next five years of civil war (1970 - 1975), further added to a growing economic and cultural gulf between people living in the cities and the countryside. This, along with the widespread anger and resentment towards the US and the corruption within the Lon Nol government, provided ideal circumstances for the Khmer Rouge to gain strength and support.

On the 17th of April 1975, the Khmer Rouge seized Phnom Penh, completing their takeover of the country. The city's inhabitants were forced to leave the capital, and moved to rural areas.

Some two million people, including Luong's parents and 6 siblings, were forced out of Cambodia's urban centres and into re-education schools and communal farms, in a matter of days.[8]

Luong Ung describes the scenes of chaos and confusion as the Khmer Rouge soldiers at first declared the war to be over, only to force Loung's family to gather what they could carry and leave their home. There was uncertainty about where they were going or when they would be able to return - only being told that it was for their own protection - and those who refused to leave were brutally punished. The family walked with their belongings for 7 days, only stopping at night to search for food and sleep in fields along the roadside.

Once in power, the Khmer Rouge targeted, arrested and executed perceived 'enemies', including members of the previous Lon Nol government, religious groups (Cham Muslims, Christians and Buddhists), ethnic minorities (Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai citizens), and anyone considered an intellectual. This last group included academics, teachers and clergy; with people being killed because they wore glasses which was seen as an 'indication of literacy'.

Over the next four years, the regime also severely restricted the basic human rights of all citizens; people could not leave their assigned cooperatives, gather in groups, practise their religion or even express affection. They closed or

6) USHMM Genocide Prevention, Country Case studies: Cambodia, *War Closes in on Cambodia* <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/war-closes-in>

7) USHMM Genocide Prevention, Country Case Studies: Cambodia, *Origins of the Khmer Rouge*. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/origins-of-the-khmer-rouge>

8) Bophana Center, Khmer Rouge History [iPhone App], *The Forced Evacuation of Phnom Penh*.

9) Translated from the Khmer language.

repurposed schools, religious institutions, and government buildings, turning them into prisons and re-education camps. The regime demanded total loyalty to Angkar, the 'organisation', [9] which was seen as everyone's "mother and father". [10]

Loung Ung's recollection of this time mirrors that of thousands of others. Her family was separated when her father was taken away and never returned, her older siblings were sent away to work camps where her 14 year old sister, Keav, died from food poisoning. Loung was forced to work in the fields for long hours with little food. All around her she witnessed starvation and cruelty:

**"Every day consisted of Mondays and every Monday was a work day and it didn't matter if you were 6 or 60. It didn't matter if you were a musician or a dancer or a singer. It only mattered if you could work the land and grow the food. To support a war you didn't know about, you didn't want. To dig trenches, to build dams... For the next four years we would wear black shirts and black pants, every single day. We were told what to say, how to wear our hair. What to call our parents so that they were no longer our individual loving persons but they were now just comrades. We were told when to eat, where to sleep, when to travel. We lived in fear."** [11]

With each passing year, Angkar, became more and more paranoid, blaming many of its loyal

supporters for Cambodia's problems. Around 1% - 5% of all Cambodians were seen as traitors or "pests buried within" [12], they were rounded up in their hundreds each month and sent to security centres, prisons like Toul Sleng (S-21), to extract forced confessions and execute suspects. Of the 14,000 to 17,000 prisoners that were detained at Toul Sleng, only 12 prisoners are believed to have survived. [13]



Children at work during Democratic Kampuchea. Documentation Center of Cambodia (USC Shoah Foundation)

**"And so I hid myself. So completely, so silent..."**

At age 7, Loung was forced to leave her sister and join a camp for child soldiers where she was trained to lay land mines and fight the Vietnamese. She describes how she managed to survive all alone:

**I knew from then on, at 5 years old, that to survive, I had to become dumb, deaf, mute, blind, invisible. Just so I could have the privilege of taking that next breath, just so that I could live. Because if I messed up, if I wasn't paying attention. If I somehow outed myself as a person who came from a family from the city, who were**

**targeted because of my bi-racial parentage - my mother being Chinese, my father being Cambodian - of someone who actually went to school, of someone who spoke Chinese and Cambodian and studied French... It wasn't my life only that I would endanger, but the lives of my parents, and brothers and sisters and loved ones. And so I hid myself. So completely, so silent..."** [14]

On 25 December 1978, 150,000 Vietnamese troops invaded Democratic Kampuchea and overran the Kampuchean Revolutionary Army in just two weeks, thereby ending Pol Pot's government. Vietnamese military intervention, and the occupying forces' subsequent facilitation of international food aid to mitigate the massive famine, ended the mass atrocities and genocide.

Four of Loung's siblings managed to survive the genocide but life in Cambodia under the Vietnamese occupation was harsh with few surviving teachers to teach in

10) Cambodia Tribunal Monitor, *Khmer Rouge History*. <https://cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/khmer-rouge-history/>

11) Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, YouTube (Aug 31, 2021). *First They Killed my Father: A daughter of Cambodia Remembers* [video]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jiFLzCf39sg>

12) Kosal Path & Angeliki Kanavou (2015) *Converts, on Ideologues? The Khmer Rouge practice of thought reform in Cambodia, 1975 - 1978*, *Journal of Political Ideologies*. Vol. 20, No. 3, 304-332

13) USHMM Genocide Prevention, Country Case studies: Cambodia, S-21, *Toul Sleng* <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/s-21>

14) Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, YouTube (Aug 31, 2021). *First They Killed my Father: A daughter of Cambodia Remembers* [video]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jiFLzCf39sg>

schools that were non-existent and few opportunities for those looking to re-build their lives and families. There was continued guerilla warfare along the Thai border between the defeated Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese.[15] Luong's oldest brother, Meng, was able to raise and borrow enough money for himself, his new wife and one other to leave Cambodia. It was the family's belief that as the youngest, Luong had the greatest opportunity to get an education, even if it meant leaving her family, her language and her culture. The route they chose meant travelling by fishing boat from Cambodia to Vietnam, hiding under a taupe covered with fish, and then another boat journey, lasting four days and surviving pirate attacks to reach the refugee camp in Thailand. They lived in the refugee camp for 4 months before they were able to travel safely to the United States. It was another 15 years before Luong was able to return to Cambodia and reunite with her family again.

*"Peace is rather an action. Many, many actions..."*

*In 2001 the Cambodian National Assembly, with the assistance of the UN, created the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, with Cambodian and international judges, to prosecute serious crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge regime.[16] In 2018, this hybrid and independent court, convicted Nuon Chea, Pol Pot's deputy, and*

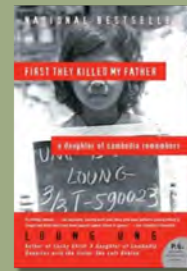
Khieu Samphan, the regime's head of state, for the genocide of the ethnic Vietnamese and, in Nuon Chea's case, also the Cham Muslim minority. Both were sentenced to life imprisonment for their roles in these genocides and other crimes against humanity. Despite the relatively few convictions and the great cost, the ECCC did allow victims to be part of the process; giving testimony, discovering the truth, having their voices heard and their suffering acknowledged. [17]

Luong Ung now lives in Cleveland, Ohio with her husband. She is a best-selling author, activist, speaker and co-screenwriter of the 2017 critically acclaimed movie *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*. She has made over 40 trips back to Cambodia, dedicating herself to justice, peace and helping her native country recover from the traumas of war.[3] Her message has reached thousands, through her books, films and talks and is one of resilience, peace and action:

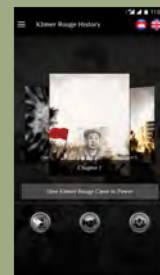
**"Peace is not an entitlement, a wish or a dream. Peace is rather an action. Many, many actions. Whether it is in our community, in our homes in our schools... whether as a mother, a daughter, a sister, a musician, a baker, a dancer, a writer an activist. We need to all be involved in this work of making peace. Because this is the only world we have and when we don't make peace in this world - where are we going to go? Where are we going to live?"**[18]

CATHERINE BOYD

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:



READ *First they Killed my Father: a Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*, by Loung Ung



DOWNLOAD the app *Khmer Rouge History* to explore this history in more detail



LISTEN to a three-part conversation with Prof. Alexander Hinton about the genocide in Cambodia.



WATCH the full interview with Loung Ung on the JHGC YouTube channel

15) USHMM Genocide Prevention, Country Case studies: Cambodia, *Renewed War* <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/renewed-war>

16) Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, *About the ECCC*. <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/about-eccc>

17) USHMM Genocide Prevention, Country Case Studies: *Cambodia, Justice, Public Participation*. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/public-participation>

18) *Luong Ung's Biography*. Loung Ung: Writer, Speaker, Activist. <https://www.loungung.com/>

19) Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, YouTube (Aug 31, 2021). *First They Killed my Father: A daughter of Cambodia Remembers* [video]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jiFLzCf39sg>