2024

A Review of The Cambodian Family: Holocaust Survival by Cathy Long

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Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.7771/2153-8999.1320
Available at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/jsaaea/vol19/iss1/5

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The Cambodian Family: Holocaust Survival, by Cathy Long, is a powerful memoir that recounts the darkest days or “Year Zero” in Cambodian history. It captures the story of how the author survived the harsh regime under the Khmer Rouge as a wife, mother, and caregiver. Long’s memoir also touches on the horror, trauma, grief, family separation, and the loss that occurred from 1975–1979 that was experienced by so many, shedding a light on the atrocities of the Cambodian people during this era. Through the hardships, Long instilled a pillar of hope, resilience, and faith for a better future for her and her family. She still believed that Cambodia could still become a good country, and valued democracy, diversity, and equality.

From the Introduction to Chapter One: Life Before Pol Pot Regime, Long described the strong and close connection between her and her mother. Long’s father passed away when she was an infant, so her mother had to raise all of her siblings by herself, with the help of a few people in the village. At times, Long’s mother had to leave for certain time periods for work to help support her family and to be able to give her children the education they deserved. Long was proud of the mother for working hard and the sacrifices that were made to provide for her education. As Cathy would describe it, life before the Khmer Rouge as a teenager was happy, normal, and filled with contentment. Cathy has lots of friends, went to school Monday to Wednesday, rode bikes and picked lotus flowers with her peers, and generally enjoyed going to school every day.

Eventually she met and married her husband, Sambo, in January 1969. They relocated to Prey Romeat, Kampong Speu, which was a small village filled with mountains and difficult roads to travel on. Food and water were also hard to obtain, making it difficult to live there. Adjusting was difficult because she was homesick and had quit school and work, but it was a sacrifice she made to be with her husband. During this time, a war had started between the Khmer Rouge and the Lon Nol military. One night, Cathy heard gunshots all around the village which scared residents into hiding from the Khmer Rouge. It was no longer safe for Cathy’s family to live in Prey Romeat, so she, her husband, and her six-month-old child escaped to Phnom Penh where Sambo completed his military training and became a police officer.

In Chapter 2: Khmer Rouge Took Over Cambodia, life was completely changed on April 17th, 1975, sparking a new era in Cambodia’s history. The night before, Cathy could barely sleep because of all the gunshots in the city. She knew that black-uniformed soldiers were killing the Lon Nol military, and if she had gone outside, she would have seen multiple dead bodies. Her family had
no choice but to prepare to escape and for the unknown. In the early morning, Khmer Rouge soldiers took over Phnom Penh and evacuated everyone out of the city and into the countryside. People were scared and listened to the soldiers who had guns in their hands. Crowds of families marched in the heat, and regardless of whether you were rich or poor, were all walking together, on the same path to their unknown destiny. Children and babies were crying for food, and the elderly and those who had disabilities had trouble following along. Sick patients who were carrying all sorts of illnesses and diseases in hospitals were also evacuated or were killed on the spot.

A week into the regime, there was no money in the new world, Angka, so people traded gold or clothes for food. People starved and became very ill with the limited food that was passed around. Then, tragedy struck, when her six-month-old daughter, Srey Touch, became sick with measles and passed away. A week later, more tragedy followed. Her son Pin had become constipated with a swollen stomach and passed the same day. Cathy’s mind was “filled with misery and the tragedy of a broken heart because of separating the loved one forever.” She deeply misses her children.

The working conditions under Pol Pot were horrible, unsanitary, and scary. People of all ages, no matter if you were old or young, worked in the field day and night, through rain and heat. Young children during this time were brainwashed or reeducated. Cathy prayed that she could live another day; everything was up to chance. In the early parts of the regime in 1975, Kampream village had about a hundred families, but after a year passed, about fifty were left. Many families eventually had a single member left, and most of the children and men had died from disease and starvation. Even through hard days, Cathy maintained high self-esteem and still found positivity in the darkness to keep her head up. This became a motivating factor for Cathy, and she was determined to get food to help her family survive.

As conditions worsened, with famine on the horizon, Cathy and her family knew it was time to escape Kampream if they wanted a shot at living. They moved to Phoom Sleng and lived in a tiny buffalo barn where Cathy gave birth to her son. Life in Phoom Sleng was no better than it was at Kampream. The family continued to live in hunger, starvation, and severe famine so her hope started to dwindle again. Sambo, her husband, was called by the Khmer Rouge to leave to another camp, leaving behind her three-week-old baby, and her mother had fallen very sick. The passing of her mother wrecked her. Cathy couldn’t even see where her mother was going to be buried because she was sick herself and just had a baby, so she prayed to her mom and dedicated a poem to her. Once Cathy got better, she was on a mission to find more food for her family. Her attitude and strength to still have hope through the worst of conditions is extremely inspiring to me. How can one person believe that there could be a better future with those conditions?

In Chapter 5: Escaped from Khmer Rouge to Vietnamese Liberation, it was January 1979 and Vietnam had invaded Cambodia and seized Pol Pot’s brutal regime. Cathy heard many gunshots and mortars throughout the village and was unsure how she and her family were going to escape. She cared more about finding food for her children than anything else. In the middle of the night, Cathy’s family and another family escaped the area, and along their trek, they heard more gunshots and rockets and that’s when she knew that the Khmer Rouge had attacked Vietnamese troops. Finally, they reached the Vietnamese base and were welcomed into the area. Still, she couldn’t just “relax” and feared that the Khmer Rouge soldiers would attack their base. Suddenly, the soldiers attacked, and Cathy hid herself with her children and continued their long journey through the cold and freezing morning—having to cross a river five times for her children and belongings. The unimaginable happened: Cathy and Sambo were reunited. She never thought they would see each other again, and now their family had become whole again. As they kept walking, they came across a bad smell with millions of flies around it. It was a scene of dead bodies who were either killed by
the Khmer Rouge soldiers or were bombed from the mines. This stopped and made Cathy reflect on how so many families never had the chance for freedom.

In Chapter 6: *Life under the Vietnamese Regime and in the Camps (1979-1980)*, Cathy moved to Monkal Borey and was reunited with her sister-in-law, brother, nieces, and nephews. Cathy heard about the United Nations, Red Cross, World Relief, and UNICEF joining together to build refugee camps for Khmer survivors. Cathy and her family made their way to Chamromp Tmey Camp then to Kok Kyoung Camp and did not stay for long at Kok Kyoung Camp due to rockets being dropped by the Khmer Rouge. Cathy felt reluctant to leave behind Cambodia; her home country and a place she’s only known but knew that she wouldn’t be able to return to Cambodia with all that happened. Saying goodbye was going to be difficult. It was a sacrifice she made for her family’s safety, so they made their way to a refugee camp called Khao I Dang Camp in Thailand. From there, Cathy’s family flew to the Philippines to prepare for their final destination the United States.

Once on U.S. soil, Cathy was eternally grateful that she could be in a safe place with shelter, money, and food. She describes how comfortable she became in the United States and that life was “gorgeous” and slowly integrated herself into the American lifestyle. Although she loved America, there were difficulties adjusting to this new lifestyle. This meant new norms, expectations, routines, and assimilation into the dominant culture. She struggled during her first few years in America, but with hard work, her determination for a better future, and her positive, high self-esteem, she believed she could be successful. She wants to share her story and a sentiment that through the struggles, barriers, and hardships, you can still be successful. With that, her journey has inspired her commitment to becoming a teacher. She spent numerous years working as a paraeducator and substitute teacher in Long Beach, California. Even in semi-retirement in Texas, Long believes that educators and learning play a big role in better understanding our complex world and other cultures that are different from our own.

In all, the book “The Cambodian Family” by Cathy Long is a compelling memoir of how she and her family survived the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. To be able to tell a story, one that is traumatic, sobering, and dark in detail with so much loss, grief, and near-death experiences is remarkable. Stories like Long’s should be uplifted, heard, and acknowledged. Her bravery, dedication, and hope speak volumes about how she and so many other Cambodians survived. Long’s writing is part of a larger collection of memoirs written by survivors of the Cambodian “holocaust” and should be read by anyone interested in history and the strength of the human condition. Her book is honest and without much agenda other than sharing her truth about one of the darkest periods in human history. As a daughter of Cambodian refugees and immigrants who survived the Khmer Rouge, I heard many stories from my parents, relatives, and family friends about their lived experiences during these very difficult years. The Khmer Rouge destroyed the education and economic system, forcing the people to work under cruel conditions at communal farms, which in all claimed the innocent lives of two million people. However, I’ve only heard bits and pieces of my family’s story because of how hard it is to retell it; the reaping trauma, unpleasant memories, and uncomfortable conversations. I imagine that this memoir would be helpful for other Cambodians who also only know about the Khmer Rouge period through stories and history books. Long’s memoir painted a vivid picture of life during this time and provided me with additional perspective on my own family and identity. It has inspired me to do more research on my family history, historical events in Cambodia, and the long-lasting impacts of the Khmer Rouge on my community today.
About the Author

Jalisa Sang is a Cambodian American undergraduate student, who is graduating in Spring 2024 at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. She is majoring in Family Social Science and Youth Studies, and minoring in Public Health. Her research interests include Southeast Asian American immigrants/refugees, Cambodian history, immigration policies, detention and deportation, education and early childhood education disparities. She is currently working on a research project that dives into the barriers of Southeast Asian American students in higher education.
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