

## **Shame keeps Cambodian village mum on Pol Pot**

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KAMPONG THOM PROVINCE, Cambodia -- The most striking thing about the village is that there's nothing striking about it.

There's nothing that belies the heavy history straddling this community of roughly 300 families set along the serpentine River Sen.

This farming village named Prek Sbov is the birthplace of Pol Pot, the dictator who ruled Cambodia in the 1970s and contributed to the deaths of perhaps 2 million Cambodians, or about one in five people at the time.

He lived here the first six years of his life, before moving to Phnom Penh and then to Paris, Vietnam and China. He returned to orchestrate a mass, egalitarian killing of his people between 1976 and 1979.

Up and down these dirt roads, anyone old enough to know this truth isn't telling. The history and shame that Pol Pot came from their community is too great, villagers in roughly 20 interviews said. The past is their secret: The children don't know; new villagers don't know. It's a village purposely ignorant of its own notoriety.

Then on Feb. 4, one of the last hints of the past disappeared when Pol Pot's younger brother, Saloth Nhep, 84, died. Some villagers breathed quiet relief.

"We were hoping for his death," said Ak Ourn, 72. "We were waiting for his death." Now, an almost systematic erasing of the past is nearly complete. The village chief, area monks, respected elders and common villagers agree the name Pol Pot eventually will hold no relation to Prek Sbov, a community that doesn't yet have electricity.

"All the memories will run out," said Kit Choen, the village chief. "No one will remember."

It's the Khmer way.

Here, Pol Pot, the fourth of six children, is Saloth Sar -- his birth name, which means "white" in Khmer, given for his pale complexion. Pol Pot was his revolutionary name.

This community offers contrast to the birthplaces of other such infamous leaders: A statue of Stalin looms over his birthplace in Gori, Georgia. Mao's hometown is a tourist attraction. In Braunau am Inn, Austria, a plaque outside Hitler's birthplace reads: "For peace, freedom and democracy, never again fascism, millions of dead warn."

The few with remaining memories of Saloth Sar here describe an affable and precocious boy wearing white. These memories are hardest to rationalize, villagers said. How could little Sar become Pol Pot?

Another question villagers face: Why Prek Sbov? In an overwhelmingly rural nation, 783 villages exist in Kampong Thom province alone. Few possess distinguishing factors. Each village melts into the next.

"We're embarrassed," said Mom Pot, 74, her head shaven and teeth black. "We're ashamed. He came from here."

Others express dismay that while Pol Pot controlled Cambodia, he neglected Prek Sbov. The village was one of the 12 killing fields in Kampong Thom, according to the Documentation Center of Cambodia, which documents crimes from the Khmer Rouge era. Two of Pol Pot's nephews from here were killed.

To this humiliation, most say, there seemed simple recourse: Forget. Even Pol Pot's dozens of extended relatives here say they don't think about the past and haven't experienced discrimination.

When the Vietnamese overthrew the Khmer Rouge in 1979 after four years of agrarian slavery, Prek Sbov was awash in new villagers. No one told them Pol Pot came from the village.

"I don't want to know," said Suin Sokun, 48. "I don't know why I don't want to know."

Ask children if they recognize the name Pol Pot or Saloth Sar or the Khmer Rouge and unknowing eyes answer the question.

In Cambodia, Prek Sbov's relative anonymity embodies this culture, scholars say. Historically, Khmer have selective memories.

There aren't any Khmer-produced chronicles before World War II. Even the Angkor Empire and its decline was forgotten during France's colonization. Anything perceived as shameful people quickly erase.

"Pol Pot was Khmer Rouge," said Youk Chhaang, director of the documentation center. "There is no other word for it that can modify or clean it. It is black forever."

No one wants to associate with that. They forget out of fear of being associated with the darkness. A selective memory will help them be restored. It becomes a denial of fact and history."

Among the simplicity of life in Prek Sbov, denial seems as natural as the river's flow. The day's work, tending to cattle or fishing, continues as it has for generations. Still, for some, the four years this lifestyle was halted remain vivid. Mom Pot said she can't forget the murder of her husband and son.

"I have to remember," she said. "I will remember until I die. But I'm alone because I know this history. I'm alone because I live longer."