

The Dallas Morning News

Confronting Cambodia's past at the Killing Fields **Thomas Huang** **August 21, 2010**

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia – I wander the fields, tracing the gentle slopes where the mass graves were. I want to hear the voices of those who died here. I want to hear their stories; that might be a way of honoring them.

Instead, silence enshrouds me. Perhaps that's not a bad thing.

Silence allows me to pray.

Silence helps me hold back the tears.

I've come to the Killing Fields to pay respect to the dead. I've come to remember Dith Pran.

Pran was a wise soul. He had persevered through a great horror, but you wouldn't have known it from his quiet demeanor.

I met him through the Asian American Journalists Association about 15 years ago. Every year at our national convention, I taught and mentored college students on a newspaper project. Every year, Pran, a small man who always carried a camera with him, entered the room and offered words of encouragement.

"Do you know who this man is?" I would ask my students. No, they would say.

So I would tell them Pran's story. He'd been a photojournalist and translator working with a New York Times reporter in Cambodia in the mid-1970s. He stayed to cover the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge. He survived four years of hard labor under that regime, pretending to be uneducated and hiding his American ties. Finally, Pran escaped to Thailand. He eventually came to the United States and became a Times photographer.

In a way, I knew Pran even before I met him. His story was the subject of the film, *The Killing Fields*. I was in college when the movie came out, and when I learned about Pran's courage, something stirred inside me. I began to think about becoming a journalist.

I remove my shoes and walk up the steps to the Buddhist stupa, a towering shrine that was built two decades ago next to the fields. I pass an altar of figs, flowers and incense sticks. I'm joined by a few other tourists, but no one says a word.

The sign at the entrance says: "Would you please kindly show your respect to many million people who were killed under the genocidal Pol Pot regime."

From 1975 to 1979, Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge leader, was responsible for the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians. In these fields, known as Choeung Ek, the Khmer Rouge executed and disposed of several thousand people.

Many of them had been interrogated, tortured and brought to the fields from Tuol Sleng, known as S-21, an old school that's now a museum a few miles away. Many of them were killed with farm tools: hoes, knives, shovels and hatchets.

Visitors fell silent upon seeing human skulls at the Buddhist memorial to victims of the Pol Pot regime's genocide.

I enter the memorial. Before me, on several levels, lie piles of human skulls. They stare back at me, some discolored, others showing the damage inflicted upon them during the executions.

At first, I am overwhelmed with sorrow and revulsion.

Then I ask myself: How else should we remember the genocide and memorialize the dead?

The Cambodians are still struggling with the best way to bring those responsible to justice. (In July, a United Nations tribunal convicted the first Khmer Rouge official of war crimes and sentenced him to serve 19 years in prison. Four other former leaders await trial.)

But, at least at this memorial, the Cambodians have decided to confront the terrible past and resist erasing history.

Pran died in March 2008 after battling pancreatic cancer. He had worked hard to educate us about the Cambodian genocide. He had worked hard to encourage younger journalists like me.

As I leave the memorial, I say a prayer for Dith Pran, hoping he has finally found some measure of peace.

I say another prayer for his country. Despite Cambodia's beauty, I know it's one of the world's poorest countries, devastated by the killings.

As I leave the fields and walk out onto the city street, a girl approaches me. "Papa," she says in rehearsed English. "Give me one dollar, and I go away."

Photographs line the walls of Tuol Sleng, the old school where thousands were interrogated and tortured in the 1970s.

Then a man nudges his 2-year-old daughter, who is naked, toward me. She holds up her tiny hands in prayer, beseeching me. I turn away; I fear that if I give her money, more people will approach me.

She is silent, and in that silence, I hold back my tears. It isn't until I write these words a few months later that I begin to weep.

GETTING THERE

Access Phnom Penh on most major airlines, including Korean Air and Delta Air Lines with a connection through Seoul , South Korea. American Airlines has flights with connections through Los Angeles and Hong Kong.

THE KILLING FIELDS

The Killing Fields site, known as Choeung Ek, is about 10 miles south of Phnom Penh, so you'll need to hire a taxi or motorbike to get you there. To enter the memorial, you're asked to donate \$3. With that donation, you can get a guide to show you around, but I didn't find that necessary. It's a small area and easily walkable. Steel yourself before you view the human skulls in the Buddhist stupa. In addition to the memorial, signs indicate where detention areas were located, and a visitors center provides historical information about the Khmer Rouge and the Cambodian genocide. Details: www.cekillingfield.com

Hundreds of human skulls cover several levels of a memorial at the Killing Fields.

Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21, is the former school where thousands of people were interrogated and tortured. It's now the Museum of Genocide. The most moving, and overwhelming, section contains hundreds of photos of the newly arrived. Details: www.tuolsleng.com

WHERE TO STAY, EAT

I enjoyed my stay at the colonial-style Raffles Hotel Le Royal (92 Rukhak Vithei Daun Penh; www.raffles.com). It was built in the late 1920s and has a lot of charm. I also received recommendations for Blue Lime, a more modern hotel with 14 rooms (42 Street 19Z; www.bluelime.asia).

The Foreign Correspondents' Club (363 Sisowath Quay) has become a bit of a tourist draw, a multilevel complex with a cafe, restaurant, bar and shops. I had a decent chicken sandwich for lunch and an Angkor beer while looking out upon the Tonlé Sap River, trying to do my best foreign correspondent impression.

WHERE TO SHOP

Phnom Penh was evacuated during the Khmer Rouge regime and became a ghost town. When people moved back, it became a city of drugs, prostitution and violence. Those problems have largely subsided in recent years – or at least are less than evident to the tourist. Still, it's odd to think there'd be good shopping here. Street 240 is known for its antique shops and boutiques. I liked Couleurs D'Asie (33 Street 240), which sells beautiful, traditional Khmer cotton scarves.

MORE TO DO

The National Museum (just north of the Royal Palace) is a gem. You'll find hundreds of artifacts and statuary from across Cambodia, as well as a courtyard with fountains full of koi. It's a good place to relax after viewing the horrors of the Killing Fields and Tuol Sleng. Details: www.cambodiamuseum.info

RESOURCES

Tourist information: www.gocambodia.com and www.visit-mekong.com

Getting an electronic visa to Cambodia is easy and costs \$25. Apply online at evisa.mfaic.gov.kh.