

A marriage made in hell; With the brutal legacy of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge fading rapidly, American journalist Socheata Poeuv was determined to find out what her parents went through. In the process, reports Chris Tenove, she uncovered a truth much stranger than fiction

Chris Tenove
July 28, 2007

PURSAT PROVINCE, CAMBODIA -- Socheata Poeuv feels her stomach clench with anticipation as the Land Rover lurches down a red dirt country road. The feeling builds as she passes dried-up rice paddies, houses on stilts and the occasional flock of children who giggle and scatter as the vehicle approaches.

Ms. Poeuv, 27, is a filmmaker who grew up in Dallas and she usually has the sturdy self-confidence as well as the broad accent of a Texan. But the Lone Star state is a long way from Cambodia's Pursat province, where she has come to see a former official of the dreaded Khmer Rouge.

His name is Son Soeum, and shortly after Pol Pot's regime seized control of the country in 1975, he was put in charge of a district of 3,000 people. Under his command, the community was decimated. Ms. Poeuv's father, Nin, was confined to a nearby work camp, and he remembers seeing hundreds of people marched into the jungle. He soon heard their screams as they were systematically executed.

Despite his past, Ms. Poeuv doesn't fear Son Soeum. She has met him before. Instead, she is anxious because she wants this meeting to help her complete a personal journey. Like many young Cambodians, she grew up knowing little about Khmer Rouge crimes. When she learned about the suffering inflicted on her family, she became deeply angry. Now, she seeks to understand and, if possible, forgive.

Ms. Poeuv first met Son Soeum in 2005. Her parents had wanted a family vacation in Cambodia, 25 years after they had fled the country for the United States. But Ms. Poeuv, then an assistant producer at NBC-TV's Dateline, packed her camera, hired a Jeep and turned the holiday into an investigation of her family's past.

The result, a documentary entitled *New Year Baby* (Ms. Poeuv was born on the Cambodian New Year) has been receiving accolades at film festivals around the world and this week had its public premiere in New York City.

The film comes at a time when young people in Cambodia – as well as the children of Cambodians who moved abroad – are struggling to come to terms with their homeland's horrific history. From 1975 to 1979, the Khmer Rouge tried to create a “pure” agrarian society by emptying cities, banning money, eliminating the intelligentsia and forging a network of prisons and execution sites to crush dissent. An estimated 1.7 million people were killed or died of overwork, malnutrition and disease.

But memories of the atrocities are fading. Many of those who survived the infamous “killing fields” simply can't bring themselves to discuss what went on and those who do often find their children react with skepticism, if not total disbelief.

For most of her life, Ms. Poev's parents refused to talk about the events that led them to Dallas and jobs at a plant that makes semiconductors. But in researching her film, she came upon not only the camp where they had been interned – but Son Soeum, who still lived in the area.

Her parents were terrified of former Khmer Rouge members. “I don't want to talk to them,” her father said. “I don't want to see them, I don't want to hear them. I hate them.”

But when Ms. Poev insisted that she would meet Son Soeum alone if need be, her father summoned the courage to join her. During that encounter, he revealed his family's darkest secret – and then he collapsed.

‘BURY THE PAST’

Cambodia today is one of Southeast Asia's poorest countries and the Khmer Rouge still casts a shadow over the country, causing everything from nightmares for those who survived to high rates of domestic abuse and the miscommunication between generations.

There has been little public debate, especially since 1998, when Prime Minister Hun Sen told Cambodians to “dig a hole and bury the past and look to the future.”

The Khmer Rouge era has been left out of textbooks and played down by the government-controlled media. Many young Cambodians don't know what to believe.

But now – delayed by two decades of civil war and one of tortuous negotiation between Cambodia and the United Nations – former Khmer Rouge leaders are about to go on trial. Since last summer, a tribunal called the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) has been preparing to hear cases.

“I have met 15- and 18-year-olds who have no idea what happened to their parents and grandparents, or why it happened,” says Robert Petit, the Canadian lawyer who shares the role of chief prosecutor with a Cambodian colleague, Chea Leang. “They have a deep need to understand the past.”

Mr. Petit, a former Crown attorney from Montreal, has prosecuted war crimes in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Kosovo and East Timor, and he knows that court cases are not the best way to examine history. “But here in Cambodia,” he says, “it may be the best option available.”

His office recently submitted the names of five suspects to the ECCC's investigating judges, along with thousands of pages of documentary evidence. The names have not been released and the trials won't begin until early next year, but the tribunal has already sparked comment – and raised some difficult questions. For example, thousands of Khmer Rouge soldiers and officials committed atrocities, but only a few top leaders will be put on trial. And they may not give the answers that Cambodians are looking for.

“I will go to the court,” Nuon Chea, the most senior surviving leader of the Khmer Rouge, told The Associated Press last week. “I don't care if people believe me or not.”

Socheata Poeuv first heard of Khmer Rouge crimes against her family on Christmas Day, 2002. The Peouvs gathered in Dallas for the holidays and her mother, Houg, called a family meeting in the master bedroom. As Socheata sat on the four-poster bed beside her older brother and two older sisters, their mother handed each a sheet of paper bearing a garbled version of the family tree.

Her mother explained that before the Khmer Rouge took over, she had been married to someone else and had a son. The revolutionaries killed her husband, and then her sister died of starvation, leaving behind two young daughters. Houg adopted the girls and later married Nin Poeuv, with whom she had Socheata.

And so Ms. Poeuv discovered that her sisters were really her cousins and her brother was actually her step-brother. She had long suspected that her family was unusual, but she was shocked that such a profound secret had been kept for so long, considering that her sisters already knew. They had memories – photographs, in fact – of their real parents and had kept them hidden.

Why all the secrecy? Shame. In Cambodian culture, broken families indicated bad karma and are often ostracized.

But even after her mother's confession, Ms. Poeuv realized there were still gaps in the story. For instance, how had her mother, from a wealthy Chinese-Cambodian family, come to marry an older, poorly educated rice farmer?

Then, when she came to Cambodia with her parents, she learned that the Khmer Rouge had tried to reorder society by attacking its cornerstone: the family. They separated husbands and wives and taught children that their only true loyalty belonged to the regime. They also forced strangers to marry. Often, the partners would be from different classes: the rich and the poor, for instance, or “pure” Cambodians and Cambodians of Vietnamese or Chinese heritage. As many as one-quarter of weddings performed under the Khmer Rouge were, in effect, at gunpoint.

Ms. Poeuv's parents refused to comment on their marriage – but then she and her father tracked down Son Soeum.

The former Khmer Rouge official met them outside his wooden shack. He had clearly had fallen on hard times, but he held himself with dignity. His face, deeply lined by years of labour under the tropical sun, betrayed no sign of cruelty or guilt. And yet he admitted that the Khmer Rouge had committed horrible crimes.

When the discussion turned to forced marriage, Nin Poeuv became agitated and began to fan himself against the heat.

“Pa,” his daughter asked, “did the Khmer Rouge force you to marry Ma?”

Avoiding her eyes, he nodded, and later got up to walk away, took a few steps and fainted, overcome by emotion.

RETURN ENGAGEMENT

The encounter left Ms. Poeuv with a deep, simmering anger. As time went by, she decided the only way she could get past what Khmer Rouge officials had done was to hear their side of the story and find a way to forgive them. Like a lot of Cambodians, she didn't know who, exactly, was responsible. The best she could do would be to track down Son Soeum again.

Now, stepping from the Land Rover two years after their first meeting, she sees that he seems poorer and in declining health. His eyes are rheumy and bloodshot, his ankles swollen with edema. Whatever authority he once had is gone; he is pitiable.

And yet, like the unrepentant Khmer Rouge leader Nuon Chea, he seems unwilling to shoulder much blame. He claims not to know who made her parents marry, and when asked about the hundreds who were slaughtered in the jungle, replies: “I did not give the orders to do that. The people who did that killing came from outside my district. I organized the cleanup afterward. When I saw the bodies, I felt terrible.”

Again and again, he blames harsh policies on superiors and violent actions on underlings acting on their own.

Then Ms. Poeuv gives a small speech she has prepared: “I didn't live here or suffer under the Khmer Rouge. My family did. But just for myself, I want to say that you are forgiven, so you can feel better.”

Son Soeum seems confused. “Thank you for coming,” he says. “Yes, I made mistakes, and that is why I go to the pagoda to pray. But I don't know what I did wrong. I only followed what the top leaders told me. If they ordered, I would do it again.”

The episode leaves Ms. Poeuv feeling ambivalent. “He didn't really admit what he did wrong, and I would have liked to hear that,” she says. Ultimately, though, she is grateful to him: Had her father not admitted that he and Houng were forced to marry, Ms. Poeuv perhaps never would have learned how his bravery kept the family together.

As the Khmer Rouge regime collapsed, Nin Poeuv decided that he really did want to build a family with his new wife. He began by scouring the countryside for Houng's two lost nieces and one day found the girls toiling in a potato field.

Next, with so many people starving around them and battles raging between the retreating Khmer Rouge and the invading Vietnamese forces, he decided the family's best hope lay outside Cambodia. Travelling at night, he led Houng and her nieces through minefields and past Khmer Rouge patrols to reach refugee camps in neighbouring Thailand. He made the perilous trip back three more times to collect more of his wife's relatives from Cambodia, including her young son.

With these feats, Ms. Poeuv's timid and often-awkward father proved his love. The family was complete when, several months later, Socheata was born in the refugee camp.

This, she now says, is another important reason why younger Cambodians must understand their country's past: not just to assign blame and understand their elders' trauma, but also to learn about acts of quiet heroism. They should know how parents smuggled food to their children, how some Khmer Rouge showed mercy and risked their lives, and how strangers came together despite the inhumanity around them.

“This is a part of history that needs to be preserved and passed down to further generations,” Ms. Poeuv says. “Cambodians deserve to have some pride and dignity again.”