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Cambodian genocide survivors gain new voice in Chicago exhibit

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A new exhibit at the [Cambodian American Heritage Museum and Killing Fields Memorial](#) sent chills up Soung San's spine.

"[Remembering the Killing Fields](#)" uses artifacts, images and oral histories to tell the stories of Cambodians now living in Illinois who survived the Khmer Rouge.

Soung San, who survived the first months of the brutal communist regime as a child, said the exhibit brings it all back. It leaves him with questions, like: Why could such a thing happen? Why us? Why our people?

Between 1975 and 1979, about two million Cambodians died from forced labor, starvation, disease, torture and murder. The Khmer Rouge targeted the military, intellectuals, doctors and artists.

Yet Bun San, Soung San's father, laments that even today, people in the U.S. still aren't aware of how many people died in Cambodia. He saw people rounded up door to door and then shot, and the Khmer Rouge firing upon entire military units, leaving only three survivors.

"I saw a lot of dead bodies on the street, especially on the rice fields," Bun San said.

The San family was forced from its home with little more than the clothes they wore. Soung San said family members count themselves among "the lucky" because they found safety in a refugee camp across the border in Thailand. But their dangerous escape had been difficult to manage. In the early days of the Khmer Rouge takeover, the border was left open. But Soung San said shortly after his family and others escaped, the Khmer Rouge closed it like a cage.

An entire nation of people was not as fortunate. That's why the Cambodian American Heritage Museum says it's so essential to capture these stories.

"Yes, we've lost so much, we need to continue on, and we need to rebuild what has been the culture that was almost wiped out and forgotten," said Dary Mien, who's executive director of the museum as well as the Cambodian Association of Illinois.

They've been working with Northern Illinois University for five years to gather oral histories of genocide survivors, some of which are contained in the Killing Fields exhibit.

The Cambodian community in Illinois wanted to provide a voice to survivors and share their experience with dignity, as well as to increase dialogue between generations, Mien said.

“The older generation normally doesn’t like to share information relating to the genocide,” Mien said. “We tend to try to really look ahead and move ahead. Some of the younger generation, especially those who were born here...it’s hard for them to understand why we left the country and why we decided to make the journey to resettle here in different countries.

“For the younger generation, I can feel it’s frustrating,” Mien said. “They want to have a little bit more of a sense of why we are here and why the community has such a mentality, why does my community do the things they do.”

She said these questions linger as each generation becomes more successful and assimilates more; they’re looking back for a sense of identity.

“To really have that dialogue is so important,” Mien said. “It’s no good the way we’ve been doing it before, keeping it very silent.” Mien has her own survival tale.

She was only 6 or so when the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975. She’s not entirely sure of her age — the Khmer Rouge forced people to destroy birth certificates, marriage licenses, even school certificates, because the regime wanted to erase any sense of identity.

“If you were caught with any kind of documentation, it was very unfortunate,” Mien said. “You could be taken into the backyard and executed.”

When the Khmer Rouge evacuated people from the cities, they separated families. Mien said her baby sister died immediately from lack of milk. She lost an aunt, uncle and cousins. Her mother was forced to dig ditches, while her father worked elsewhere on vehicles. Mien said she spent the mornings being indoctrinated in school, and the afternoons picking up cow dung. Children were rarely allowed to see their families.

After the Khmer Rouge lost power, she remembers the journey back to Phnom Penh. Landmines were everywhere. She said she could see corpses on both sides of the road, and wondered about the places she couldn’t see.

“Now I know why they described it as a ghost city,” she said, adding there were empty buildings with nothing much left inside but piles of clothing, mattresses and garbage.

Her family left about a year later for the refugee camps, then came to America in 1980.

Mien emphasized that, relatively speaking, her story is not that important. She said there are so many survivors who faced much greater difficulties; she knows people who lost their entire families, who saw their parents killed in front of them.

“Sometimes I feel so guilty, my parents are still with me ... to some of my friends, I don’t know what to say, it’s such a loss, I can’t even say, ‘I know, I understand,’” Mien said.

At the "Remembering the Killing Fields" exhibit

The exhibit gives some sense of the scale of that loss through photographs and oral histories. Survivors’ tales are interspersed with chilling images, such as a cot at the infamous S-21 prison. Only about a dozen people survived their stay at the torture center.

During a recent tour museum, librarian Kaoru Watanabe held up a pair of pliers of the type that were used to pull out people’s fingernails or teeth. She motioned to a hoe that doubled as a farm implement and a killing device.

In one corner, there’s a large silver vat. Watanabe pointed to a small can about the size of a Campbell’s soup container. That’s how much rice went into the vat to feed a large group of people. She said a serving of the watery porridge might only contain a few grains of rice, and starvation was a constant threat.

The exhibit empties into the Killing Fields memorial, a serene space filled with long, skinny glass columns that seem to float above the floor, etched with the names of those who died.

Mien said young Cambodians are going through the exhibit with gratitude that someone is finally sharing what the genocide and Cambodia were like. She hopes they’ll gain understanding of what their grandparents, parents or even older siblings have gone through.

For some of the older Cambodians, the topic is still too painful to revisit.

Watanabe said the museum staff tried to remain sensitive to that reality. They designed the exhibit almost like a box so people visiting the Association, which is both museum and social service agency, can come in without seeing the exhibit if they choose.

Mien hopes the exhibit has an impact far beyond the Cambodian community.

"This is something that should not ever happen again to anyone, to any being at all, that’s what is so important to us," she said.

The exhibit is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekdays and on weekends by appointment. Admission is free. The museum is at 2831 W. Lawrence Ave.

The museum encourages visitors to make reservations before attending the exhibit by calling (773) 980-4654 or by e-mailing anneth@cambodian-association.org. The museum tries to pair group tours with a genocide survivor, a young Cambodian-American and someone who worked on the exhibit.