



## **Interpreter of nightmares**

Cambodian genocide survivor Dith Pran helped world grasp the incomprehensible.

Editorial

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Photographer and interpreter Dith Pran, who died Sunday of cancer, recently stressed his commonality with all humans: "I want to save lives, including my own, but Cambodians believe we just rent this body," he told The Star-Ledger of Newark, N.J. "It is just a house for the spirit and if the house is full of termites, it is time to leave."

His death, though, is an uncommon loss. Just being alive, Dith represented a victory over encompassing evil. What he did with that life — raising his voice persistently and eloquently to describe Cambodia's genocide — will continue to fuel efforts to recognize and prevent genocides elsewhere.

Dith, the son of a middle-class Cambodian family, spoke Cambodian, French and English. He began working as an interpreter for the New York Times in its Phnom Penh bureau in 1970. His work with reporter Syndey Schanberg would lead both to his near-death, and to his great contribution as an interpreter of Cambodia's catastrophe to the outside world.

Like so many local interpreters to the media, mostly unsung, Dith helped Schanberg navigate far more than foreign words. He was a cultural interpreter, saving Schanberg's life by hours of pleading with Cambodian soldiers who had sequestered him after the Khmer Rouge took power.

Soon after, Dith fell into Khmer Rouge hands and, like millions of his countrymen, was forced into rural slavery. Those who showed any sign of expertise or intellect were executed. Dith pretended to be a peasant, existing sometimes on bugs or blood siphoned from an ox.

His survival was miraculous: In four years the Khmer Rouge destroyed 1.7 million Cambodians in a country of only 7 million.

Dith escaped in 1979, reuniting with Schanberg in a refugee camp in Thailand. The remainder of his life was spent documenting and protesting what had happened in Cambodia's inferno. He coined the phrase "killing fields" to describe Khmer Rouge dumping sites of thousands upon thousands of corpses and bones.

His story, documented by Schanberg, inspired the film of the same name. When the Cambodian actor who portrayed Dith won an Oscar, the world learned more about Cambodia's slaughter, and a recently crushed culture gained two heroes.

Dith later launched a foundation and became a New York Times photographer. Until he died, he used all his skills — as a journalist, interpreter, celebrity and survivor — to tell their stories.

It is unfair Dith Pran couldn't live to see Cambodia's impending tribunal of surviving Khmer Rouge leaders. But few individuals have spoken so powerfully, in so many idioms, as Dith did on behalf of so many.