



Remember Me?

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[Editor's note: When it opened in March, the trial for Kaing Guek Iev, the infamous Khmer Rouge torture chief better known as Comrade Duch, returned the world's attention to Cambodia and the horrors of the failed regime. In 1976, two American women helped care for a group of 114 Cambodians in the US who were determined to return to their home, now controlled by the Khmer Rouge. The two recently spoke with VOA Khmer to ensure the stories of those Cambodians, nearly all of whom perished, would not be forgotten. This is the second of a two-part series.]

Cynthia Coleman, who had helped the repatriates on their way to a Khmer Rouge-controlled country, was still working with refugees in the US in late 1978, when Vietnamese forces began their offensives against the regime. The fighting sent Cambodians streaming into Thailand, and in February 1979, after the capital had fallen to the Vietnamese forces, Coleman traveled to the border, in hopes of finding news of her lost friends.

“There was absolutely nobody in sight. I mean no one. I just stood at the gate stared into nothing,” said Coleman.

The Cambodians she found along the border were corralled in pens, shell-shocked and thin from their experiences under the Khmer Rouge. Coleman talked to everyone she could. She carried photographs with her, including one of Maj. Kim Pok Tung, one of the group of 112 Cambodians she had taken care of in Philadelphia in 1976.

“There was a big, makeshift bulletin board on one side of the camp. And there was hanging a lot of letters and photographs, in Khmer, people looking for family and relatives and friends, and I searched there and put up some of the photographs that I had,” Coleman said. “If you know any of these people or have seen them or have heard of them, please contact me.”

Coleman and another American, Mary Beach, who had been deeply involved in the lives of the Cambodians in 1976, had heard nothing from them for three years. Part of program through the Nationality Service Center in Philadelphia, they had been given the task of helping the Cambodians return to Democratic Kampuchea. They counted many among the group as their friends, and they retold their stories to VOA Khmer recently to ensure the group was not forgotten.

After 1976, neither of them forgot their friends, and they searched whenever they could for information about them. On the border in 1979, Coleman learned nothing, and she

returned to the US. Their fates remained a mystery until in 1981 history professor Ben Keirnan called her. He had uncovered a list of people executed in the Khmer Rouge's main torture center, Tuol Sleng. On that list were 19 names that Coleman recognized. Among them was her friend, Kim Pok Tung.

“Certainly, there is no way that you could be involved in something like this without feeling tremendous sorrow and guilt. But looking back on it was clear that there was not anything else. There was no other way that this could have ended,” said Coleman.

Coleman continued refugee work with Southeast Asians until 1986, when she changed careers. Beach worked with refugees in the US until the 1990s, when she too changed careers. Both became teachers in small US towns.

Bonded by their experiences working with the Cambodians in Philadelphia, the two kept in touch, and they continued to have Cambodian friends. But it wasn't until 2002 that a new opportunity to learn about their Philadelphia Cambodians emerged.

“I knew I had not heard anything about any of the others, in all these years,” said Coleman.

By then, Coleman was teaching high school in the US state of Michigan. As part of her lessons, she taught about the Cambodian tragedy. Eventually, some of her students began to question why she had never learned more about what happened to the Cambodians she had been so close to. She told them maybe she didn't want to know.

“So finally the kids said, all right, sit down at the computer—it was kind of a question at this point of who was running the class—but, sit down at the computer and let's see if we can find if there is some place that can tell you something,” she recalled.

It was then that Coleman learned about Youk Chhang and the Documentation Center of Cambodia, which by then had been working for years to record atrocities of the Khmer Rouge.

“Several hours later, I got an answer back from Youk Chhang,” said Coleman.

Youk Chhang, in a recent interview with VOA Khmer, remembered.

“All the adults were dead...we had found all the documents from Tuol Sleng. They were tortured and executed,” he said.

Youk Chhang sent them photocopies of documents, but Coleman still did not want to believe that every single person she had known in Philadelphia, save two who had disappeared from the regime in Paris, were dead. Still, she kept in touch with Youk Chhang, and when the Khmer Rouge tribunal stood up, both Coleman and Beach saw a chance to stand as witnesses for their friends.

Beach, who had been 22 when she met her first Cambodians and had known little about their culture or their war, was now determined that their stories be told.

“I don’t want this group to be forgotten. I don’t want them to be just a statistic somewhere. So ya, it was an important thing to do at that point,” said Beach.

The two women had not seen each other since 1976, but they reunited in Cambodia, determined to file testimonies at the Khmer Rouge tribunal. Flying in, Beach thought about her lost friends.

“I remember specifically as the plane was landing, the image in my mind was, I kept thinking, what did they see when they landed at this airport, and I sort of half expected to see jeeps full of military men with machine guns lined up along the runway,” recalled Beach.

That didn’t happen. They met at the airport. Coleman wept. They shared a hotel room, shared evenings at restaurants along the river, shared cyclos. For Beach, this time in Phnom Penh was reassuring, from the moment she stepped into the New York Hotel on Monivong Boulevard.

“When I spoke to the bellboy, or the bellboy spoke to me, in that moment it was like, oh, I recognize this, the look in his eyes and the sound of his voice, I thought, yes, this is something that I know, and the thing that I love about Cambodia has not been destroyed,” Beach said.

What she loved was still there. In short time, the two went together to visit the Documentation Center, a day Youk Chhang also remembers.

“She burst into tears while recounting the returnees. I believe that the event really affect her feeling,” said Youk Chhang.

Documentation Center staff explained to the Americans how to file their testimonies, but both declined to file in Phnom Penh, preferring instead to do it from America, far from Cambodia and its politics and its potential dangers.

“Both of us felt strongly that we had to stand witness, but I was not going to do it from inside Cambodia,” Coleman said.

The two made another stop, at Tuol Sleng, the prison where most of their friends had met their end. They looked for faces among the hundreds of photographs on display at Tuol Sleng, where 16,000 Cambodians were tortured into confessions, later to be executed on the outskirts of the capital.

“After several rooms, I said to Mary, ‘I’ve had enough, I can’t do anymore’.... And I went out and sat on the stone bench... I should have come here ten years ago,” Coleman recalled.

The trip gave each of the women some solace, knowing that the Cambodians likely understood the risks they faced.

“I sat there on that bench and I thought, these guys knew what they were potentially getting into and this isn’t anything I did,” said Coleman.

Cynthia Coleman is now 67, living in a remote town in Michigan, volunteering at the local library, keeping up on tribunal news and wondering if Duch will ever mention her Cambodian friends. She does not regret having worked with them.

“I have a tremendously strong respect and probably love for Cambodians, and I’ve never been sorry that I’ve known a good many Cambodians, and been close to a few,” she said.

Marcy Beach teaches French in Farmington, New Mexico, fulfilling a career goal she’d had when she graduated college, before she’d become so involved, by a chance hiring, in the lives of the Cambodians.

There were many times over the years that the tragedy came back to Coleman, but there is one particular time that affects her most, a letter she received in 1982.

“Somebody passed me a letter from a woman in one of the refugee camps inside Thailand, and the letter started out, ‘My name is such-and-such, I was a lead dancer with the Royal Cambodian Ballet. And I am here in a refugee camp, and need a sponsor to come to the United States. Does anyone remember me?’ I was sitting in a restaurant in Washington, DC, and I just started sobbing,” said Coleman.

As the tribunal continues, and more witnesses come forward, that answer might someday be yes.