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The Khmer Rouge Village Chief Who Saved His People From Death **Dave Walker and Sonny Chhount** **March 30, 2012**

In the village of Kuok Snuol, not far from Siem Reap airport, small groups of elders arrive to greet former Khmer Rouge village chief Van Chhuon, 64. Some still call him may, or boss.

The villagers claim that, during the time of the Pol Pot regime's bloodiest purges, Van Chhuon saved many of their lives. Their conspicuous respect for him is genuine, and moving.

In 1970, Van Chhuon lived in the village of Kompong Tkov as a peasant farmer. He knew many of the KR guerrillas, local teenagers mostly recruited from the surrounding area.

He'd watched as American B-52 bombers saturated the nearby jungle with bombs, but usually failed to kill either the guerrillas or the North Vietnamese soldiers who crossed into Cambodia on propaganda or recruiting missions.

In Kompong Tkov, he met his wife, Yim Hoy, who had fled the fighting in her own village. They were married in a Buddhist ceremony in 1971.

But fierce fighting between the KR and Lon Nol's troops soon followed, and the couple were forced to flee. Several times, the guerrillas pressed Van Chhuon to dig graves or carry the dead and wounded from the battlefield.

In 1974, in a makeshift hut in the village of Dumbrai Goan (elephant baby), Yim Hoy gave birth to their son, Chen Heng. The couple hid in bomb craters to shield their cooking fires from passing aircraft and supplemented their diet with frogs, insects and lizards.

After the Khmer Rouge victory on April 17, 1975, they were sent to the village of Kuok Snuol.

The Khmer Rouge organised the villages into sangkats, or communes. Sangkat Siem Reap was comprised of 10 villages, whose chiefs reported to the commune chief. The village of Kuok Snuol had about 100 families.

"For work, I was assigned a team of 15 youths to scare birds away from the rice fields. We strung ropes across the fields and made scarecrows from old clothes," recalls Van

Chhuon. “In the fields, we could also find extra food.”

Yim Hoy, meanwhile, served food in Kuok Snuol’s communal kitchen. “The people asked that I work there because I always gave out fair portions,” she explains. “The Khmer Rouge did not allow anyone to possess rice, and hiding food was punishable by death.

“Sometimes, we’d see soldiers forcing trussed prisoners to run in front of a bicycle to the commune office at Teuk Vil. From there, they were taken to the old French prison in Siem Reap (now the five-star Sokha Hotel) where they were starved, beaten, tortured and killed.”

In September, 1977, the revolution turned on itself. Fanatical new troops from Takeo province seized the preceding KR soldiers, village and commune chiefs, drove them away in trucks, then butchered them.

“The dogs always knew when people were being killed,” says Van Chhuon. “They would howl to each other, from village to village – a very spooky howl, unlike anything I ever heard before.

“Even the way they barked was different. I believe the dogs saw people’s ghosts. In Khmer, we say chakai lou.”

The KR now needed new leaders, but chosen only from the purest of the base people. They asked the villagers: “Who is the poorest man here?”

The villagers identified Van Chhuon, who was then designated village chief. His first task was to bring Ta Khan, the deposed commune chief, to a meeting at the KR commune office in Teuk Vil (now the Paradise Eco Resort).

“I rode him there on my bicycle. When I saw the soldiers waiting for us, I knew they were going to kill him. There was nothing I could do.”

Obsessed with internal enemies, the Khmer Rouge ordered all village chiefs to report anyone suspected of disloyalty, hiding food or being pro-Vietnamese.

Van Chhuon explains: “Some village chiefs reported people out of fear. They thought that if they didn’t find any enemies, the KR might suspect them.

“In the neighbouring village of Wat Svay, more than 80 people were executed. Their chief was not really a bad man. He was just easily led.”

Van Chhuon was given the power over life and death. He chose life.

“I knew if a villager was arrested, they would be tortured into giving information. Then more people would be arrested. They might tell the KR we were hiding food, and I would

be arrested with my family.”

In a village matter, Doan, the brother-in-law of sugar-palm climber Ta Kuol, 65, had been known to sexually service not only the village widows but also the wife of a village man.

Ta Kuol says: “Doan knew he would be arrested, so he climbed to the top of a palm tree, threatening to jump off and kill himself. We talked him down, and then went to see Van Chhuon.

“At a village meeting, it was decided that no report would go to the commune office, because Doan would be killed.”

Nam Van, 57, states: “My job was to mill rice. Van Chhuon was always kind, and never reported anyone to the authorities. Marriages were never forced. “Both parents would agree to the union, and then the couples would all sit together and be married at a village meeting.”

A villager named Heng adds: “The village teacher lived here the whole time. Van Chhuon never told the Khmer Rouge about him. When the KR came for me, he sent me out to grow vegetables. “They never found me. Van Chhuon saved my life, and many other lives.”

“We lived in constant fear,” says Yim Hoy. “Every time my husband was called to a commune meeting, I didn’t know if he would ever return, especially if the soldiers came at night. Four times I believed I would never see him again.”

Defying the Khmer Rouge for two stress-filled years, Van Chhuon ensured that his villagers hid extra rice in the watery gruel they were allowed to eat, and that people hid extra food outside of their houses, as Khmer Rouge spies would search them while people were out working.

To avert suspicion, Van Chhuon would tell his villagers in speeches that if they stole a potato, he would bury them in the potato field. Or if they stole a banana, they would be buried under the banana tree.

“I had to be a good actor,” says Van Chhuon. “But one time, I had to go with the soldiers to arrest the wife of a Khmer Rouge soldier in another village. The KR soldiers called the people to be arrested, cows. “After they took her, the soldiers cooked some chickens they confiscated, but I could not eat. I never went on another arrest.”

After that, whenever the KR came to arrest someone, Van Chhuon told them they’d already been taken, or that nobody by that name lived there.

Villager Nai Kong, 58, was arrested and sent to the prison in Siem Reap for complaining about the regime. Showing the many scars still on his body, Nai explains: “There were 40 prisoners in one room, all shackled together. There was one cup of rice for 40 people. I

saw many people die, and believed I would also die.”

Although Van Chhuon had no powers to protect prisoners, he successfully argued for Nai’s life. Two months later, he went to pick him up.

“When I saw Van Chhuon on his bicycle, I couldn’t believe it,” remembers Nai Kong. “He assigned a villager to take care of me, and I ate many duck eggs.

“One year later, Van Chhuon showed me my name on a list of people to be arrested. He had a tear in his eye. But five days later, the Vietnamese came and the Khmer Rouge ran away.

“I am alive today because of Van Chhuon, and I told this to the ECCC. (Supreme Court Chamber of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia).”

Ironically, Nai Kong is the current village chief of Kuok Snuol. Before this interview, he and Van Chhuon had not seen each other since January, 1979.

“When the Vietnamese tanks came in January, 1979, I ran into the jungle to hide, because people were taking revenge on the Khmer Rouge. Some village chiefs were hacked to pieces with machetes.

“Later, some elders came and asked me to return to the village to supervise the rice harvest. After the harvest, I returned home to Kompong Tkov.”

Thirteen years later, in 1992, Van Chhuon asked for two men to help him build his house in Siem Reap. Forty-five villagers showed up, led by Ta Kuol.

They brought a lot of food. Startled neighbours thought it was a demonstration. In a way, it was.

By all accounts, Van Chhuon lost only one person while he was the village chief of Kuok Snuol – Ta Khan, the former commune chief.

Van Chhuon laments: “I still regret his death to this day.”