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Seeking the Truth of the Khmer Rouge

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Born and raised in Prasat, a small village in Cambodia, Kosal Path was a child when the radical Communist Khmer Rouge came into power, igniting a genocide that would end in the massacre of nearly two million citizens.

He was 4 when his aunt was forced to marry a Khmer Rouge soldier responsible for murdering her loved ones. The day before her wedding, the bride-to-be committed suicide.

Thirty years later, Path, a lecturer in USC College's School of International Relations, returned to Cambodia over the summer with 10 of his undergraduates to research the country's 1975-79 genocide. Their objective was to assess whether the United Nations-backed tribunal met Cambodian survivors' expectations for justice and national reconciliation.

The trip took place under the auspices of the Problems Without Passports program, created by Steve Lamy, vice dean for academic programs at the College. The program includes three field-research courses in which students travel to various countries to examine issues firsthand.

"I tell my students, 'What you study can have a serious impact,'" Path said. " 'You can be a more engaged scholar. You can be an agent of change.' "

Path was an undergraduate in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, when he learned about the atrocities committed against his family. It wasn't until 1996, when he became a translator for Yale University's Cambodian Genocide Program, that he was able to fully grasp the brutality of the Khmer Rouge regime.

He brought his students to the former Khmer Rouge Tuol Sleng prison and Choeugn Ek killing fields, where some 17,000 men, women and children were clubbed to death and left in ditches — one of the nearly 20,000 mass gravesites in Cambodia. He wanted his students to understand the gravity of the crimes before attending the trial hearing of the Khmer Rouge former S-21 prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch.

In addition to attending the trials, students had the opportunity to interview victims of the Khmer Rouge. They also questioned former members of the Khmer Rouge S-21 prison — a more complex task than they had imagined.

“We struggled with how to make a distinction between perpetrator and victim,” recounted Lauren Dawson, a sophomore majoring in international relations and neuroscience.

Tiffany Handley, a senior majoring in international relations/global business, added: “I felt that some of the low-level officials were as much victims as they were perpetrators because it was ‘kill or be killed.’ ”

Five of the students published their research papers in *Searching for the Truth*, a magazine of the Documentation Center of Cambodia. In Cambodia, they helped community outreach teams distribute high school textbooks describing the history of the Khmer Rouge.

Path remembered his own high school years, when textbooks devoted a few sentences to the Khmer Rouge era, calling the barbaric regime “genocidal,” and the leadership “a reactionary clique,” but never offering an honest account. “The state-run propaganda in the 1980s hijacked the real quest for the truth,” Path said. “The people of Cambodia just want the truth. They want to know why this happened to their families.”

Path recalled the first several years of his life, when his parents were forced into labor camps. He was permitted to see them once a month.

“I thank my parents for protecting my life and for loving me under such a difficult circumstance,” Path said. “Justice has been delayed for 30 years, and people are losing trust in the international community. The current tribunal is their last chance of seeing some kind of justice.” Path said what his students learned in Cambodia was invaluable.

“Each student returned a different person,” he said. “And in the future, they may become more involved activists or better-informed policymakers. They now clearly understand the impact of global politics on millions of people’s lives.”

Handley, for one, now has a deeper appreciation of the dynamics surrounding the Cambodian genocide and the long-awaited trials.

“I hope that humanity will feel the wounds and the scars of the Cambodian people in order to truly understand that we are all in this together,” she said. “We should unite to fight oppression to guarantee that ‘never again’ is not a hollow statement, but a promise to our future.”