

Where Will My Hope Come From?

Chheng's Story



A lot of people have a lot to say about the situation in Syria. Keep all refugees out, let only the Christians in, make the Middle Eastern countries take the burden. I don't claim to understand all the geopolitical complexities behind this debate, but I might know a little about what these refugees might be experiencing. Seeing their images—their looks of desperation and helplessness, a father's fear about whether he can protect his child, a lifeless body of a boy, brings me back to the same emotions I felt.

Because I was a refugee, too. My name is Chheng and I was born in Cambodia. I usually don't like to talk about my past. For so long I didn't want to look at those Syrian faces because I didn't want to see the same sadness and fear I had felt myself. But hearing what people are saying about these refugees makes it difficult to stay silent.

I was born maybe in 1970—though when I was registered in the refugee camp they put 1971—so I would have been four or five years old when the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia. I have fragments of memory of that time. Soldiers with guns yelling—I didn't know how to understand what they were saying. I just remember the look of

panic and fear in my parents' faces—it shook me to my core. My mom said it was chaos everywhere as people were forced out of their homes onto the streets not knowing where to go except that we had to leave the city.

My mom's parents were born in China, they then escaped the war in China to go to Thailand where my Mom was born; eventually they left Thailand and settled in Cambodia. My father's parents were from China and fled to Cambodia also but I know even less about his story as he rarely spoke about his life. I grew up speaking Chinese.

The Khmer Rouge's aim was to eliminate from the country any trace of foreign influence—which they interpreted as money, markets, religion, education, Western medicine, and private property. At the extreme, this meant that those who were educated or even wore glasses were targeted for execution as traitors to this new leadership. They killed anyone who spoke a foreign language. I didn't really speak Khmer so my Mom said, *Pretend that you're mute and deaf so that you aren't discovered.*

Most horrible, the Khmer Rouge broke the bonds between parents and children. The only loyalty was intended to be to the State. We weren't allowed to show love or care or affection for each other as that would show we had loyalty toward someone other than “Angkar” and therefore were “traitors”. Husbands and wives were executed publicly for showing affection. There were many public executions to show this is what will happen to you and to keep people in fear. I don't remember if my mother cried when my sister died of starvation and lack of medicine—I've been too afraid to ask her—but I'm guessing she didn't out of fear of being shot. I think the Khmer Rouge was also afraid. They were suspicious of everyone and the more they feared, the more they killed.

To survive, we had to kill all emotions, we had to break all human connection and once it's gone, it's very hard to get back. This was one of the worst things the Khmer Rouge did. It hurts generation after generation. Parents who can't express or are too afraid to love. Parents who can't connect with their children.

We lived through four years of the Khmer Rouge until in 1979 the Vietnamese invaded and that gave people the opportunity to leave the country and seek refuge in Thailand. After months of walking we made it to Thailand and we were in a refugee camp by the border.

My understanding is that there was an influx of refugees, like you see today, and the Thai government couldn't handle the burden without more international support. So overnight they told us *We're going to move you to a new camp, a better camp*, but there was mass hysteria because everyone knew there was no new camp. Afraid we were going to be killed, my mom tried to give my sisters and me to a Thai family—*Go go go!*—and of course we hung onto her and wouldn't leave.

They put us in a bus and drove for hours into the jungle and left us there on a very steep mountain. They said, *You can walk back to Cambodia or walk to Vietnam but you cannot come back into our country*. They forced us down the mountain at gunpoint and would shoot at anyone who moved too slowly or tried to run back up. The mountains were so steep my parents had to use a rope to get down. There were elderly people who could not keep up and their families had to leave them behind to die.

Some people did decide to go back to Cambodia but my parents said, *If we go back to Cambodia we're going to die. Our only chance is to try to sneak back into Thailand*. So we tried with some other families. Every time we would get close the guards would shoot at us and we would go back down.

It was during monsoon season and there was no shelter, nothing to hide under, nowhere to sleep. We only had the clothes that we had on and we would sleep in the mud in a wet puddle. Well into my adulthood, I remained troubled by the rain. People got eaten by the tigers and the other wild animals in the jungle. And the dark of the night! It was pitch dark. No light of any kind, I couldn't even see the stars because the forest was so big. I remember thinking *We're going to die We're going to die.*

There were mines everywhere because it was during wartime. My mom told us about one family where the son went looking for food but he stepped on a mine. His brother went looking for him and before he reached him, he stepped on a mine. So the father goes out looking for his two sons and he stepped on a mine.

There were so many times I can look back and think we shouldn't have survived. Other people died and we ended up living. We were so fortunate. At the end of 27 days, the Red Cross came and found us. Evidently someone had bribed a soldier to send a letter to a relative in France and this relative seems to have alerted the Red Cross.

At the time news of the atrocities in Cambodia had become more widespread and the Thai government agreed to allow our group of refugees in if other nations agreed to sponsor them for eventual settlement inside their own borders.

We were sponsored by a Christian church in Washington State and they were very kind. They embraced my family and cared for us. My parents were so impacted by that kindness that though they didn't speak the language and their world had been torn inside out and everything was so new and unfamiliar, they will say those were the best two years of their lives because of the kindness of the people.

One family helped by babysitting us children so my parents could work. Other people helped them with all the little things they didn't yet know how to do for themselves. One woman took my mother grocery shopping. American supermarkets

were so unfamiliar! Another gave her English lessons. Someone taught my father how to drive. So many people each took a little time out of their busy days to see if we needed anything. It was like everyone came together to help and it was such a life-changing experience of community and the church and the difference we can make individually and collectively. It takes so little to make such a difference.

In Washington State my parents worked in the strawberry fields, they washed dishes and they were grateful for that, being able to make a living. But they heard there's more work in Los Angeles.

In Los Angeles they worked in the garment factory. We all worked in the sweatshop. I have three siblings—two younger sisters who were born in Cambodia and my brother who was born here. I was ten, my younger sister was nine and the youngest was six. We went to school and then we went to the factory after school. We had no daycare and nowhere else to go and we needed the money so we would work till 9:00 or 10:00 at night and then I'd do homework. Sometimes my parents would work till 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning. They were very resourceful and they worked so hard. We just made the best of what we could and that was growing up, working.

In Los Angeles, there was no one who understood. When I went to school I started having memories and nightmares—awful nightmares—and memories and I would be so terrified and when I tried to tell it, people didn't believe me. They didn't know anything about Cambodia. They didn't even know where Cambodia is. So they couldn't really help and nobody knew. When we were in Washington State, people were interested. They asked my parents their story. They even had someone come and interpret so the church and the community knew something of their plight and rallied behind them. But when we came to Los Angeles, no, no. No one.

Nobody knew I ended up ditching school because I was so scared. I thought the teacher was going to kill me. I would have nightmares that they were coming at me with knives. I was ditching school because it was the only thing I knew to do to not feel so frightened. And I remember the response. They didn't ask me what was going on. They just told me ditching school is against the law, you can go to jail.

Like many people seeking security and life, we came to the States where there was no war but there was a lot of internal turmoil in the family and inside me. And I think now of my parents. My parents had family in Cambodia, two brothers and a sister and their family who died and they never knew how they died. They couldn't find out about them and they would hear stories about how they were maybe clubbed to death or buried alive. My father got cancer and he died this past year and he never had the opportunity to heal and find peace from what happened in Cambodia.

But I was fortunate because there was always somebody along the way who made such a difference for me. There were always one or two people that were very instrumental in helping. There was always someone who was kind, and in high school that's when I found therapy and that's when things started to get better. Maybe that's why I do the work I do now with children and families as a licensed clinical social worker.

The program that I work in, we specialize in treating children and families that have experienced a variety of traumatic events. Some of our families and foster parents and teachers—so many people and service providers—are not aware or informed about the many faces of trauma and how it affects brain, mind, body, and spirit. Now I support and guide other clinicians.

It's trauma-informed care. Being trauma-sensitive, it's like when I was ditching school, I wasn't being bad. I was frightened. So it's about looking to understand the

reasons for behavior, helping someone to feel safe and not just punishing someone or saying, *That's a bad kid*. It's about conscious listening and teachers and other providers getting to know the children and their families. Maybe what it really means is remembering kindness. Connecting. Being kind. That's what saved me: at different times in my life someone was kind.

For a long time I thought maybe it's better not to remember, but even to this day, I try to piece different memories together and now I think it's urgent to talk. It's important for me and also because today more people are seeking safety and refuge and they need a voice.

I think about my oldest sister Huang who died. Sometimes I think I remember her, sometimes I think it's just dreaming. I wish I knew what she would say today. I wish I could be my sister's voice.

And I feel I should speak for all the dead. I have visited Cambodia twice. And once I went to this place where there were mass graves, where they still have thousands of bones and skulls and I was sitting there and a woman came and sat and said she didn't know what became of her family or how they were killed or where, but this place was the closest she could come to being near them and remembering them.

And now, with the Syrian refugees, I feel I want to say something, to them, to the world. I want to speak but I can't find the words.

I think what all people have in common is that all people need hope, hope for authentic connection and to live in peace. That's what kept us going, that we had hope. And this may sound strange but I think the people who recruit for ISIS, they find people who are in desperate need of hope. They show up in the midst of people's suffering, anger, hurt and a kind of hope is what they seem to offer.

So what we need to do, we need to give people that hope. But I wonder what happens to hope when people risk so much and survive so many dangers only to be told, *You can't come in.*

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