

Sokphal Din



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Forced out of his home by the Khmer Rouge on 17 April 1975, Sokphal endured hard labour in the Killing Fields and eventually survived the Genocide in Cambodia by escaping to Thai refugee camps where he lived for seven years.



'We knew that we'd never go back. We knew this is a lie. They just want to kill us. And we knew that we'd never see our father again. We kept hoping, but we knew that it's impossible.'

Sokphal was just 17 years old in April 1975. He lived comfortably with his mother, father and three younger siblings in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. His father, Deuon Din, was an accountant for the existing military in Cambodia and his mother, Pan Penh You, was an entrepreneur. Sokphal was a bright and hard-working boy, who wanted to go to medical school.

Sokphal and his mother and siblings were having breakfast at their home, when there was a knock on the front door. Sokphal opened the door to two soldiers wearing all black from the Khmer Rouge – the extremist Cambodian Communists whose army had seized the city. One soldier pointed his gun at Sokphal and threatened to shoot if the family did not leave their home immediately and get out of the city. Crowds of people were already walking out of Phnom Penh.

'We didn't ask why, didn't lock the door... Didn't think to do anything else... Didn't take anything with us.'

Sokphal's father, Deuon, was already at work in his military uniform. They had to get civilian clothes to him before he was found by the Khmer Rouge, who were killing anybody linked to the existing military of Cambodia that they had just overthrown. Fortunately, a man who worked for Deuon found him first.

Sokphal's extended family all met at his uncle's home. They travelled among the crowds without any water, and were eventually taken to a labour camp. Sokphal was forced into hard labour, seven days a week under the hot sun, in farms, fields and rice paddies. His food allowance was just three spoonfuls of rice per day. These vast agricultural areas became known as the Killing Fields, because enslaved civilians were worked to death. Anyone who disobeyed was beaten or killed.

The Khmer Rouge believed in an extremist version of Communist ideology and aimed to eliminate all social classes. They wanted all members of society to be rural agricultural workers rather than educated city dwellers, who they believed had been corrupted by western capitalist ideas. Sokphal lied, and said that he couldn't read or write and had sold bread on street corners in Phnom Penh. This lie saved his life. The Khmer Rouge searched everyone during the day and night for valuables, which were confiscated, or for identification, which could reveal a hidden past. Luckily, Sokphal had lost his ID card which showed he was a student.

The Khmer Rouge demanded that people who had worked for the old Cambodian military, teachers and the educated declare themselves so that they could be sent back to Phnom Penh to be 're-educated' for three months before returning to their families. Deuon and Pan Penh, Sokphal's parents, had to decide what to do next. Eventually, Deuon left to 'study' in Phnom Penh, believing that the Khmer Rouge would treat his family better if he obeyed their orders.

The night before his departure, Deuon told Sokphal to look after his brothers, sister and mother. As the eldest, this was now his duty. Sokphal and his mother were very close. They worked together to look after the family and keep each other going. Sokphal says she was his best friend and he would not have survived without her.

After weeks of waiting with no news from Deuon, the Khmer Rouge told them that they were going to leave the labour camp to be reunited with the rest of their family. Sokphal and Pan Penh were suspicious, but excited. However, their optimism was short lived. The Khmer Rouge led Sokphal and his family deep into the jungle where they were abandoned without food, water or tools to help them survive. The Khmer Rouge had lied and Sokphal realised that he would never see his father again.

In the jungle, Sokphal's grandmother fell ill. That night they slept under the same mosquito net, Sokphal holding his grandmother's head in his arms. As morning arrived, Sokphal realised she had passed away in the night. With great sadness, the family cremated her body in the jungle.

Sokphal was taken away from the rest of his family to work in a labour camp again. As he left in the morning, Sokphal heard his brother Kosal crying. He was only six years old and sick with malaria. Kosal cursed the soldiers for taking Sokphal away and begged him to stay. But Sokphal had to walk away in tears. Two days later, he heard that Kosal had died.

When the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia on 25 December 1978, Sokphal was forced by the Khmer Rouge to train as a soldier, but vowed to himself that he would never kill anyone. Sokphal was captured by the Vietnamese Army who thought he was a Khmer Rouge soldier by choice. He was held in a brick oven with other prisoners. Sokphal thought, 'That's it. They're gonna burn us alive in here. I'm gonna die.'

Instead he was moved to a prison in Siem Reap. He was held there for many months, interrogated and tortured. Meanwhile, his mother asked extensively about her son's whereabouts and had made the journey to Siem Reap on foot, with Sokphal's little brother and sister in tow. Finally, a fellow prisoner managed to negotiate his release alongside her own, and Sokphal was reunited with his family.

Sokphal bartered clothes for gold until he could eventually afford to pay for a guide to help his family escape from Cambodia to Thailand. The journey was very dangerous – the Vietnamese could still recapture them, the country was full of landmines and the rainy season meant much of the land was flooded. Eventually the family made it to a refugee camp at the Thai border. They would live here for many years, waiting to be allowed entry to a new country.

'In the camps we were waiting and waiting and hoping that one day we would leave the camp. There is no future there, living with barbed wire around you, and we were hoping to have a good future somewhere else.'

Finally, the family made contact with a cousin in England, who sponsored them through the Red Cross. They arrived in England on 4 August 1987 and the family began to build a new life and learn English. Sokphal and his family lost all of their property and belongings in the genocide and he has only recently retrieved his birth certificate to discover his real age.

Sokphal is now a freelance translator, works part-time in a supermarket and is writing a book about his experiences.

Find out more...

The Genocide in Cambodia: hmd.org.uk/cambodia

Life stories of those affected by genocide: hmd.org.uk/lifestories