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Var's life was changed forever in 1975, when Cambodia's genocidal Khmer Rouge regime forced her family from their homes and into slave labour.



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Var was born in Cambodia in the town of Takeo, south of the capital Phnom Penh. She had a comfortable upbringing with her three sisters and two brothers. In March 1970, Var was working as a teacher and living in Phnom Penh with her two young daughters, Somaly and Panita, and her husband, Virak Phong, was working for UNESCO in Paris, when the country was plunged into uncertainty.

Cambodia's communist-sympathising ruler, Prince Sihanouk, was overthrown in a coup led by the USA-backed General Lon Nol, who declared Cambodia a republic. The country was thrown into a devastating civil war between government forces and communist insurgents. The most powerful amongst these was the Khmer Rouge.

On 17 April 1975, Khmer Rouge forces entered Phnom Penh and seized control from government forces. This marked the beginning of the Genocide in Cambodia. Key to the philosophy of the Khmer Rouge was the belief that Cambodia should start again with 'Year Zero', returning to an alleged 'golden age' when the land was cultivated by peasants. Their aim was for the country to be ruled for and by the poorest in society.

The Khmer Rouge wanted all Cambodians to be rural agricultural workers rather than educated city dwellers, which the regime perceived to be corrupted by capitalist ideas. Professionals, such as lawyers, doctors and teachers, were murdered, along with their extended families. Some of the Khmer Rouge's victims were murdered simply for knowing a foreign language, wearing glasses or even expressing emotion.

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The Khmer Rouge ordered Var and her family to leave the city 'for three hours only' and to carry nothing with them. Two million people were forcibly evacuated out of Phnom Penh and onto the road.

After walking for a month, the crowd, completely exhausted, stopped in the village of Botrokar, where the Khmer Rouge started to integrate arriving city-dwellers like Var and her family into rural life. They were set to work on collective farms immediately, overseen by the Khmer Rouge. Young boys took care of cattle, while girls either cleaned out cattle pens or collected dung for use as fertiliser. Adult men and women were forced to carry out intensive physical labour such as digging reservoirs and irrigation canals, and harvesting crops.

The conditions were terrible, with long hours, no or few breaks and meagre food provisions. Var and her family were permanently hungry and weak from the labour. With disease rife and many dying of starvation, these collective farms became known as 'the Killing Fields.' Over the course of the genocide, it is estimated that between one and three million people were murdered.

'There was the smell of rotting flesh everywhere and some people's toes even dropped off. At night we could hear people moaning and children screaming with pain.'

In addition to forced labour, the Khmer Rouge also sought to control and demoralise the population through weekly meetings known as *Kor Saang*, during which workers were publicly humiliated and forced to 'confess' to crimes and faults. Furthermore, every day they were forced to sit through 'brainwashing sessions' to be indoctrinated with the Khmer Rouge's extreme and violent ideology.

The Khmer Rouge regularly forced crowds to relocate to different villages in order to prevent uprisings. Var's family was transported to the small village of Thmar Pouk, near the border with Thailand. Upon arrival, they were placed with a family of four living in a tiny home. They slept on the floor before waking up at three o'clock in the morning to resume the back-breaking labour.

After two months, a rumour spread in the village that the Khmer Rouge were looking for educated persons and previous military personnel to send to Phnom Srok, the district town, for 're-education'. Over the coming weeks, the village chief visited all the houses asking people about their life under the Lon Nol regime. Knowing that her past as a teacher put her and her family at risk, Var told them that she was a street vendor. However, the village chief found out that Var's brother, An, had been a soldier under the Lon Nol regime, and he was taken away.

'We never really had a chance to say a proper goodbye to him', Var recalls. 'We simply came back one day and he was gone.'

Still under the watchful eye of Khmer Rouge, the family had no opportunity to grieve their lost relative and continued work as agricultural slave labourers. In 1978, they heard rumours that the Vietnamese army had invaded Cambodia and was fighting against the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge placed further pressure on workers to speed up the harvest, with people often working in the fields past midnight. Var heard artillery fire in the distance as she harvested.

Once Vietnamese soldiers arrived in Thmar Pouk, the Khmer Rouge fled into the mountains. Var and her family, along with over one hundred villagers, left on foot for the Thai border. The journey was dangerous, with landmines strewn across the jungle. When they got closer to the border, the Thai police picked them up and took them to a refugee camp. Due to the efforts of several relief workers, Var and her daughters Somaly and Panita were eventually accepted for resettlement in the United Kingdom.

In 1981, Var learned in a letter from a friend that her husband, Virak Phong, had flown back to Phnom Penh in early 1976 with several hundred other Khmer intellectuals. The group was told that the Communists could use their skills to rebuild the country, but they were imprisoned upon arrival in Phnom Penh. Virak Phong died in prison that year.

Var settled into life in the UK with her children, and had another son, Peter, in April 1984. She now lives in Surrey with her husband David. Her book about life under the Khmer Rouge, *From Phnom Penh to Paradise*, was published in 1988.

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