

Unknown Heroes of Cambodia

Stories of rescue from the
Cambodian Genocide

Unknown Heroes of Cambodia: Stories of rescue from the Cambodian Genocide

(Last updated 12 August 2019)

Authors: Karolina Strozek, Dovi Seldowitz

Acknowledgements: This publication was supported in part by the B'nai B'rith NSW Andrew Havas Internship Fund. A special thanks to the many friends of Courage to Care for their comments and feedback.

This booklet has been prepared as a supplement to Courage to Care workshops & programs. The information is based on current publicly available sources, and while all care has been taken and measures put in place to ensure the accuracy of the information presented, we do not represent it as definitive.

© B'nai B'rith Courage to Care (NSW) Inc. 2019

Contents

Who are the Unknown Heroes? 4

Rescuers of the Cambodian Genocide (1975-79)..... 6

What have we learned?.....17

What does it take to be a hero? 18

Who are the Unknown Heroes?

Unknown Heroes are those ordinary men and women who demonstrated the ‘courage to care’ by protecting, assisting or sheltering victims of mass genocide. Such tales emerge from the darkest and most horrific events in modern history and are important moments in time upon which to reflect.

Faced with such large-scale brutality, it is all too easy to become overwhelmed by the horror. One cannot avoid the inescapable question: how can humans behave so inhumanely towards each other?

The stories of the ‘unknown heroes’ demonstrate that even in the darkest of times there will always be ordinary people who will stand up and place themselves at risk to protect others from prejudice and injustice, racism, bullying and discrimination.

The Unknown Heroes Project

The Unknown Heroes Research Project was launched by Courage to Care NSW to research and share stories of unknown heroes from the genocides of the 20th Century.

This booklet explores the stories of unknown heroes from the **Cambodian Genocide**. It contains general information about the genocide, profiles of notable heroes, as well as shorter stories of bravery which demonstrate that even ‘ordinary people’ are capable of extraordinary acts.

The aim of this booklet and others in this series is to show the various rescuers as exemplars of ‘upstanders’, inspiring us all to take positive action in the face of prejudice, injustice and discrimination in our everyday lives.

What is Courage to Care?

Courage to Care is a non-profit organisation which aims to inform Australians of the dangers of bullying, discrimination, racism and prejudice through educational programs, exhibitions, workshops and school programs. Courage to Care strives to combat discrimination in all

forms by inspiring and empowering each individual to become an 'upstander' and take positive action when witnessing prejudice or bullying. Our central message is that every person can make a difference, and that ordinary people are capable of extraordinary acts.

A Note to Teachers & Students

Aside from the unknown hero stories, there are additional resources listed in the booklet, including suggested readings, films and websites to read survivors' accounts. Please note, the additional resources listed may contain disturbing accounts of the genocide and are not intended for all age groups. Teachers should advise younger students as to appropriate resource selection.

Rescuers
of the
Cambodian
Genocide
(1975–79)



Between 1975 and 1979, Cambodia was ruled by the communist Khmer Rouge regime. The Khmer Rouge led a four-year genocide during which, at least 20% of the country were executed or starved to death. Estimates of those people killed vary, from 1.7 million to 3 million.

The Khmer Rouge attempted to transform Cambodia into a classless agrarian utopia, forcing people from their homes and placing them in farming communes. The regime targeted various ethnic and religious groups, as well as professionals and anyone who with Western education.

Stories about the genocide usually focus on the horrific mass executions and the conditions in the communes, but some stories shine a light on acts of bravery and rescue.

Van Chhuon

'The Farmer Who Fooled the Khmer Rouge'

Prior to the Cambodian Genocide, Van Chhuon and his wife worked as simple peasant farmers in Cambodia and were some of the poorest people in the country at the time. When a small battle broke out near their village Kompong Tkov, between the Khmer Rouge militia and Marshal Lon Nol's troops, the couple fled for safety and survived by living in a bomb crater and eating lizards and insects. When the Khmer Rouge regime gained full control over Cambodia in 1975, Van and his wife were sent to work in the village of Kouk Snuol in the countryside. Once there, Van was quickly made the commune chief, as the Khmer Rouge believed he would be the most ideologically pure out of all the commune members, given his simple and lowly background and status prior to the regime.

As a commune chief, Van was under strict orders to turn over any members from his commune that had been part of the 'old society' (i.e., the educated, Westernised or religious) or who complained about the new order



Van Chhuon

Farmer

Born: 1948, Cambodia

and showed signs of resistance. However, Van continually refused to do this, and instead protected the identities of all his commune members, even at the risk of being tortured and killed himself.

To prevent mass starvation, Van also secretly gave out extra food rations to his commune members and taught them how to safely hide food from the militia who would often come to inspect the communes and interrogate the members. This defiant act was one that would have again been punishable by death, and further demonstrates the bravery and selflessness that Van possessed.

In order to avoid the suspicion of the militia, Van would give public speeches to the villagers, warning them that they would be buried in the fields if they were caught stealing or hiding food. However, word did eventually get out to the militia about someone breaking the regime's rules within his commune, and several Khmer Rouge troops soon came to investigate the situation. Thankfully, Van was able to convince the troops that the culprit had already been taken care of by another group of soldiers, and the troops left them in peace, at least for the time being.

The life of each commune member was precious to Van and he did whatever he could to make sure

each one of them survived. When one of the commune members, Nai Kong, was arrested and sent to prison in Siem Reap for complaining about the regime, Van pleaded and argued endlessly for Nai to be released. When Van



Rice fields in Cambodia

was finally successful in his petition, he rode to the prison on his bicycle to bring Nai back to the commune.

Thanks to Van's compassion and bravery, the lives of 100 families were saved. During the four-year Khmer Rouge regime, only one person from the entire commune was executed. For years afterwards, Van received many gifts and expressions of gratitude from the many people who survived thanks to him.

Life under the Khmer Rouge regime

Under the Khmer Rouge, Cambodians were forbidden from using money, accessing media content, or speaking in foreign languages. Those that refused to be 're-educated' were killed. Simply crying or showing signs of displeasure with the new regime could result in immediate execution if noticed by a militia member.

Dith Pran

'The Chronicler of the Killing Fields'

Before the Cambodian Genocide began, Dith Pran was working as a hotel receptionist in Siem Reap. Prior to this job, he had worked as a translator for the U.S. Army while they were stationed in Cambodia, and also as an interpreter and guide for a group of New York Times reporters. While spending time with the reporters, Dith came to form a close friendship and working relationship with one particular reporter, Sydney Schanberg. During his time working with the American journalists, Dith taught himself to become a photographer.

When the Khmer Rouge regime gained political power in 1975, bloodshed spread through the capital city of Cambodia as Pol Pot's militia opened fire on the citizens of Phnom Penh. To find out how many people had been killed and injured by the massacre, Dith visited several hospitals in the city along with the New York Times reporters. At one of these hospitals, Dith and the reporters were approached by a group of armed Khmer Rouge



Dith Pran

NY Times Photographer

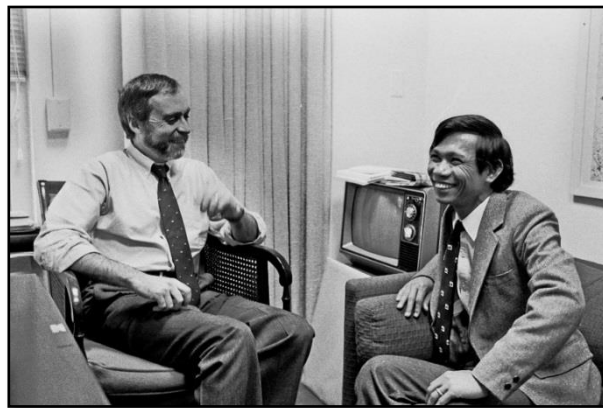
Born: 27 Sept. 1942, Cambodia

Died: 30 March 2008, USA

soldiers who were ready to shoot at the Western foreigners. Luckily, Dith was able to act quickly and convince the soldiers not to kill Sydney and the other two reporters, saving their lives. However, Dith himself was soon taken away by the soldiers and put into an armoured vehicle which would send him to work and live in a commune in the countryside like the rest of the city's surviving residents. By pleading for the American journalists, Dith risked his own life to save the lives of others.

With the help of Sydney, Dith's family were able to safely migrate to the United States. But for Dith, the situation quickly worsened. Nevertheless, he was determined to survive to reunite with his family and to report on the events of the genocide to the outside world.

To avoid being immediately killed by Pol Pot's militia, when he arrived at the commune, Dith pretended that he had been a taxi driver before the Khmer Rouge regime and kept the fact that he was educated and had foreign contacts to himself. This was because the Khmer regime planned to purge the country of the 'tainted' practices that had



Sydney Scahnberg (left) with Dith Pran (right)

been brought into Cambodia by foreigners.

During his time in the countryside there were many days where Dith and his fellow commune members were given only one teaspoon of rice to survive on. As the members were all constantly hungry, they

would scrounge for anything edible they could find, such as rats and snails they found around the commune.

Dith survived the following years until the regime was eventually dismantled by Vietnamese troops in 1979. Dith returned to his hometown Siem Reap to look for members of his family, and soon after his arrival he discovered that over fifty of his family members

Who did the Khmer Rouge target?

As part of their process of 'cleaning up' their country of foreign ideas and belief systems, the Khmer Rouge militia exterminated the educated and wealthy classes in Cambodia (such as lawyers and teachers) as well as people with outside religious beliefs (mostly Buddhists and Muslims). All foreigners were also kicked out of the country, with all forms of foreign ties and aid cut off from reaching Cambodia.

had died from either starvation, exhaustion, or execution.

When a group of Eastern European reporters later visited Dith's village in Siem Reap, Dith was able to get a message to Sydney through them, and the pair were reunited soon after in Thailand.

From there both men travelled to the United States where Dith was finally reunited with his family. Upon arrival in the United States, Dith was offered a job as a reporter for the New York Times, whilst also gaining American citizenship status in 1986.

The story of Dith's experiences during the Khmer Rouge regime, and his relationship with Sydney,

were later turned into an Academy Award-winning film titled 'The Killing Fields'. The title was the name given to the fields outside the infamous Tuol Sleng Prison ('S-21'), where thousands of people were imprisoned, tortured and executed.



Dith Pran with his family

Dith's activism to ensure the memory of the Cambodian Genocide be preserved led him to create a project in 1994 to help fellow Cambodians find their missing family members through his photographic records. Dith also published a book of child survivor stories, preserving the memory of the genocide through the eyes of its youngest survivors.

How did the genocide end?

The Khmer Rouge regime was overthrown in 1979 by Vietnamese troops who invaded Cambodia and established a pro-Vietnamese regime.

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Acts

The two men mentioned below were recognised for their acts of bravery and compassion in an exhibition that was held in Cambodia in 2011 ('The Rescuers Exhibition'), which sought to highlight the actions of ordinary, brave individuals during the period of the Cambodian Genocide.

Ngen Ngon

Ngen Ngon saved several people from his home village from being executed. He did this by helping to free a group of people who had been detained in a local school and Buddhist temple. In order to help people escape from the temple, Ngen had to break down the entrance door of the temple and physically carry some of the people out of there and over the fence as they were too weak to walk (due to exhaustion).



Huy Sarin

Huy Sarin helped 11 people who had been destined for the killing fields (the farming districts known for conducting executions) escape from Chhlong to Preah Sdech Districts. Upon reflection, Huy noted being grateful for having had the chance to help save others from a looming death, even at the risk of his own life, saying '*I am happy because I was lucky and had the chance to help people.*'



Justice is finally served

In 1997 the Cambodian Government requested the United Nations to assist them establish a tribunal to hear cases against senior members of the Khmer Rouge. While the former Prime Minister of the regime, Pol Pot, died of a heart attack and could not be tried, other officials involved stood trial and were sentenced for the crimes they committed.

The Cambodian Genocide Debate

There is some debate among scholars whether the legal term of 'genocide' fully applies to the actions of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

The term 'genocide' is used today to refer to violence committed against members of a national, ethnic, racial or religious group by perpetrators with the intentions of destroying the group (the term combines the Greek word *genos* (meaning race or tribe) with the Latin suffix *cide* (meaning 'to kill')), however, crimes committed against political and social groups are not classified as genocides under the Genocide Convention.

This modern legal concept was formulated after the end of World War II, when the full extent of the atrocities of systematic murder committed by the Nazi regime became known. Before this time, officials implementing the mass killings of a group could not be punished by law. A lawyer named Raphael Lemkin successfully initiated the Genocide Convention in 1948, with the United Nations declaring that genocidal events would now be considered an international crime. Since this time, the convention has been ratified in over 130 countries worldwide.

Years later, the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS), a notable scholarly group, has sought to define various historical events as genocide and passed several resolutions formally recognising modern genocides.

Genocide vs Auto-Genocide

Some scholars have proposed that the alternate term 'auto-genocide' (extermination by one's own country) be used to describe what happened in Cambodia (since the Khmer Rouge were Cambodian). Others argue that the term 'genocide' should still be used as religious and ethnic minority groups were specifically targeted (including Buddhists and Muslims). Additionally, the Khmer Rouge may have considered any individual or group who opposed the regime's ideology as members of an external group who were not 'real Cambodians', making the term genocide applicable.

Sources

- Brown, Kerry. 'Obituary: Dith Pran'. *The Guardian*. 1 April 2008.
www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/01/cambodia.pressandpublishing.
- 'How do you define genocide?' *BBC News*. 17 March 2016.
www.bbc.com/news/world-11108059
- 'Khmer Rouge: Cambodia's years of brutality'. *BBC News*. 16 November 2018. www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-10684399.
- Lavinia Selvakumar, Denise. 'Cambodian Genocide: Background history'. *University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB)*. 15 December 2005.
www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/33d/projects/genocides/cambodia/CambodiaHistoryLavinia.htm.
- Martin, Douglas. 'Dith Pran, photojournalist and survivor of the Killing Fields, dies at 65'. *The New York Times*. 31 March 2008.
www.nytimes.com/2008/03/31/nyregion/31dith.html.
- Morris, M. '10 heroes who stood up to dictators and genocide'. *listverse.com*. 27 July 2014. www.listverse.com/2014/07/27/10-heroes-who-stood-up-to-dictators-and-genocide.
- Wahlin, Willhemina. 'The Rescuers Exhibition, Cambodia – Booklet'. *PROOF: Media for Social Justice*. 30 September 2011.
www.issuu.com/willhemina/docs/cambodiarescuers/18.
- Walker, Dave, and Sonny Chhount. 'The Khmer Rouge village chief who saved his people from death'. *Phnom Penh Post*. 30 March 2012.
www.phnompenhpost.com/national/khmer-rouge-village-chief-who-saved-his-people-death.
- 'What is Genocide?' *History.com*. 14 October 2009.
www.history.com/topics/holocaust/what-is-genocide.

Photo Credits

- ‘Van Chhuon and his wife Yim Hoy’. Photo by Dave Walker via *Phnom Penh Post*.
- ‘Rice fields in Cambodia’. *The International Rice Research Institute*.
- ‘Dith Pran’. Photo by Neal Boenzi. *The New York Times*. 1980.
- ‘Sydney Schanberg and Dith Pran.’ *The Guardian*. 1980.
- ‘Dith Pran with his family’. Photo by Gordon Clark. *The New York Times*.
- ‘Ngen Ngon’ and ‘Huy Sarin’. Photos by Nicolas Axelrod. *The Rescuers: Picturing Moral Courage*. Proof: Media for Social Justice.

Further Resources*

Books:

- *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* by Lung Ung (2000)
- *Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields: Memoires of Survivors* by Dith Pran (1997)

Movies:

- *First They Killed My Father* (2017)
- *The Killing Fields* (1984)
- *Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia* (1979)

Survivor Accounts:

- Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Cambodia
www.tpocambodia.org/khmer-rouge-survivors
- Edweb: Exploring Technology and School Reform
www.edwebproject.org/sideshow/stories/index.html

* *Additional resources may contain intense accounts of the genocide and may not be suitable for all age groups; younger students should consult with their teacher for appropriate resource selection.*

What have we learned?

Learning from history: What challenges did the heroes in these rescue stories face? Are there elements of these stories relevant to situations experienced by students in Australia today — at home, at school and in the community?

Developing empathy: What basic elements of human nature can be observed in the actions of the heroes, the victims and the perpetrators in these stories?

Taking personal responsibility: What were some of the difficult choices faced by the heroes in these stories? How were these choices affected by personal background, other individuals, families and communities?

Appreciating and welcoming diversity: What reflections on the concepts of tolerance, mutual respect and acceptance can be gleaned from these stories? How has the acceptance of cultural diversity become part of a modern, democratic society, like Australia?

What does it take to be a hero?

What is hero? We typically think of someone with extraordinary abilities, rescuing people who face danger, but is this really the case?

At Courage to Care, our programs refer to rescuers during genocide calling them ‘upstanders.’ In referring to genocide, the general tendency is to focus on the perpetrators and the victims, the people doing the killing and those being killed. But there are also bystanders who witness the killings and do nothing to protect victims. And finally, there are the real heroes who stand up to injustice and help where they can.

At the heart of the Courage to Care program is the lesson we can learn from the most significant events of the 20th century, the genocides, teaching all of us a universal precept: one person can make a difference, and even ordinary people are capable of extraordinary acts.

Their stories are an enduring example of the power of the individual to make a difference, and a poignant reminder that it is our own choices that determine if we remain bystanders, or become upstanders who take positive action in the face of prejudice and discrimination in our everyday lives.

The message of Courage to Care is to be aware of the dangers of prejudice and discrimination, and to strive to combat discrimination in all forms by inspiring and empowering the individual to become an upstander and take positive action.

Being an upstander means being a hero in your own private life, even if no one will learn how your actions made a difference in someone else’s life.

Being an upstander is part of everyday life, not just in times of great turmoil, like a genocide. Standing up and speaking out takes courage and compassion.

In what areas in your life can you make a difference?

What does it take for you to be an upstander?

Learn More

To learn more about Courage to Care, go to our website at:
www.couragetocare.com.au

Additional resource materials and links are available on our website:

Student Resources: www.couragetocare.com.au/students

Teacher Resources: www.couragetocare.com.au/teachers

Do you have feedback you'd like to share about the stories in this booklet?

Please email us at: info@couragetocare.com.au

