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Cambodia into a network of barbaric prison-like labor camps, forcing families apart and out of the cities to work on communal farms and build infrastructure.

Workers were not allowed possessions or contact with their families. They were expendable cogs in a machine, worked to death and frequently tortured or executed for trivial missteps.

Cambodians starved to death beneath trees full of ripe coconuts and oranges. In the newly communist and heavily militarized Cambodia, trees belonged to everyone, so their fruits were off-limits.

Due to his boyish looks, Khmer Rouge soldiers initially thought Kilong was much younger, and they placed him in school with little children.

As Kilong recounted life under the Khmer Rouge, he said up until about 15 years ago, he couldn't get through his story without breaking into tears.

In 2009 he revisited many painful memories from his life under the Khmer Rouge in his brutally candid autobiography, "Golden Leaf."

The book led to a speaking tour where he told his story to audiences at Columbia University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

"I didn't know anything until I read his book," his older sister, Sivheng Ung, told Street

Roots. "I just cried – and there's a lot more things too that he didn't write in the book."

She said he doesn't like to talk about the murders he witnessed when he was placed with the children. She said the Khmer Rouge would kill people for trivial transgressions, such as stealing a coconut, by crushing their skulls with a hammer.

They would make the children watch so they would be easier to control.

"Some of the kids cried, because they miss their parents; they run away, they get caught, they get killed," she said.

Kilong wasn't kept in the school for very long as it became apparent he was older than the other children during lessons. He had a seventh-grade education, and it was difficult for him to contain his knowledge among children learning the alphabet.

Once his age was discovered, he was sent to what he described as the "Navy Seals" of the labor forces.

Cambodians who resided in cities, such as Kilong and his family, were handed the harshest work assignments, and as a young man, he was in the hardest-worked demographic.

He built roadways and dams, working with about 400 other prisoners. They were divided into groups of 10, each group with one leader and three subgroups. Each subgroup had its own leader with a second in command as well.

"This is how they control you," he said. "You breathe, these two people know, and then this other person knows, and it gets escalated to the top."

As tempting as it was, suicide was not an option. Khmer Rouge soldiers made it clear they would torture and kill all the family members of anyone who took their own life to escape the killing fields.

"I was forced to work 13 hours a day, every day, 365 days a year, for almost 5 years," Kilong said.

His spirit and his body were broken.

As a child he had spent more than a year studying under a Buddhist monk in the temple near his home, but under the Khmer Rouge, he lost all faith.

But at the time, he said, the only thing on his mind was figuring out how to survive each day.

The two daily meals under the Khmer Rouge were typically porridge containing water and two spoonfuls of rice.

There were other times when workers would squat, 10 men around a single small pot of stew. It would be mostly water, with a few vegetables and maybe one fish tossed in for nutrients.

Starving and eager to eat, the men were forced to wait for a whistle. Then it was a free for all, each man for himself as he attacked the soup.

Kilong's mother traded some salt to get him a large copper spoon.

"She got it on the black market," he explained, because under communist rule, there was no trade and no commerce.

"That's corruption," Kilong said sardonically. "That's evil, that's a crime. You get up, work, contribute, and there is nothing else."

Aside from the clothes on his back, that spoon was his only belonging. Half the handle was removed so he could plunge his hand to the bottom of the pot and try to retrieve some vegetable pieces after the whistle blew.

Kilong learned to secretly hunt rats, bats, termites, snakes and bees to supplement his diet. Those who didn't often starved to death.

Before the Khmer Rouge's four-year reign of terror ended, both of Kilong's parents and his grandparents would be dead.

He was laboring in a rice paddy when he received news that his beloved little sister, Ali, and his nephew, had both died on the same day – his nephew in the morning and his sister in the afternoon.

He was not allowed to leave the killing fields to attend funerals, nor does he know where his parents' bodies are buried.

In all, nearly 2 million Cambodians died from starvation, execution, disease and overwork during the Khmer Rouge genocide.

Kilong saw his sister not long before her death, and he described her appearance in his book. She was 11.

"I noticed her legs, bare from the knees down – dry, cracked, stained, and barefoot. Her entire body was covered only by an old ragged sarong rolled at the waist, leaving the top of her body naked. From behind, through the exposed dry, rough skin, I could see her vertebrae and the backside of her rib cage. If I hadn't been so weak from hard labor and malnutrition, I could have picked her frail body up with one hand," he wrote.



In January 1979, the Vietnamese Army defeated the Khmer Rouge, liberating Cambodia from one oppressive regime and replacing it with another.

Kilong was reunited with several of his surviving sisters. Upon returning to Battambang, they found their family home had been demolished. In its place were squatters' shelters.

Eventually Kilong escaped to Thailand with his older sister, Sivheng, and her boyfriend. It was an adventure he recounts in detail in his book. They were shot at, held hostage and had run-ins with bandits and Khmer Rouge soldiers in exile. But eventually they made it safely to a refugee camp.

They registered as a family, lying about Kilong's age. They claimed he was born in 1964 because they were told this would make immigrating to the U.S. more likely. He was 15 all over again.

They flew to San Diego that same year when a family there agreed to sponsor them. It was the first time Kilong had ever been on a plane. About six months after arriving, they took a Greyhound bus north to Portland, where they moved in with the brother of Sivheng's boyfriend.

Kilong thinks he was about 20 at the time, but he was enrolled as a sophomore at Washington-Monroe High School. For the previous five years, he'd had no education. He didn't speak English and couldn't multiply or divide. When he first arrived in the U.S., he

At top, mug shots of Kilong (far right), his sister Sivheng Ung and a friend, Vann Mealy Metta, are taken at a refugee camp before immigrating to the United States. Above, Kilong at age 10, poses with his father, Kilin Ung, in front of a 12th century temple in Cambodia in 1970. The day before Street Roots sat down with Kilong Ung, he received a copy of this photo from his cousin, whom he hadn't spoken to in 30 years. He had no idea the photo existed. Under the Khmer Rouge, it was a capital crime to keep photos, but his cousin's family kept this photo hidden during the genocide.

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