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My Father, Pol Pot's Butcher

By Justine Smith

BATTAMBANG, Cambodia — Her hands shake as she reaches up to the rafters of her one-room hut to pull down a photo in a gilt frame that sparkles incongruously through the gloomy poverty.

She dusts it down and gazes at the white-haired old man in the picture. Ho Khoem hesitates, then hands it over, her eyes flickering warily to assess my reaction.

"That's him," she says through our interpreter, who shudders at the sight and the memory of this benevolent-looking geriatric.

Ho then brings down a second picture, the same man in his demonic prime. In this one, a stern black-and-white portrait superimposed bizarrely over a picture of a then-modern Asian home, he looks far more the career killer.

Dressed in a black uniform, his cold eyes stare defiantly, his shoulders taut with power, his wife submissive by his side. He is Ta Mok, or Grandpa Mok, an innocuous-sounding pseudonym that still unnerves any Cambodian who lived through Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge reign of terror.

Ta Mok, born Chhit Chhoeun, earned the less cuddly nickname of The Butcher for the brutal efficiency with which he carried out Pol Pot's orders to wipe out enemies of the regime. Thousands upon thousands of them.

"Yes, my father did bad things," Ho whispers tearfully, as her teenage daughter skulks in the shadows, listening to her mother speak of the family's guilty secret for the first time.

"But was he evil? I can't believe it. He must have done the things he did for a reason. He was not like that at home. He was not a bad father. Strict, but he loved us in his way. So why would he kill, kill, kill, like they say?"

About 1.7 million people, or one quarter of the Cambodian population, perished in less than four years under the Khmer Rouge, including babies who were swung against blades wedged in tree trunks to save bullets.

It is believed Ta Mok was personally responsible for the deaths of thousands, if not tens of thousands of innocents, including a single slaughter in the Angkor Chey district in which 30,000 people died.

Ho, 56, said: "I wanted to ask him exactly what he did but I never could. I suppose I was scared of him. It is in our culture that you do not disrespect your elders. He would have been very angry if I had asked him.

"Because I am a woman, I was kept out of it. My brothers were put in commanding positions by my father, but I was put in charge of a hospital. I did not know what was going on.

"When the Vietnamese took over in 1979 I had to read about the torture and the slaughters in the newspapers like everybody else. I was in shock. It was the first time I had ever heard what my father had done.

"The nightmares started, seeing him do those terrible things. I still have nightmares and I still live in fear that one day someone will come to my house and take revenge on me and my daughter as we sleep. I do not sleep very much."

Ta Mok was one of just two former Khmer Rouge leaders charged with genocide. He was due to face trial by a panel of Cambodian and international UN-selected judges later this year. He had been in jail for more than seven years when he died last July, aged 81.

Just one of his former comrades remains in custody, Kak Kek Ieu, known as Duch, who oversaw the slaughter of 10,499 "spies and traitors" and 2,000 children at the capital's Tuol Sleng torture centre.

It is now a grim museum displaying records of the victims, all meticulously documented by the regime itself, but Duch is unlikely to have to answer for his crimes as the tribunal lurches from one diplomatic crisis to another.

Other former Khmer Rouge killers accepted amnesty while Ta Mok was fighting on, having deposed Pol Pot in 1998. Many are immune to prosecution.

Some of the more minor members of the regime still enjoy privileged positions in the army and government—including prime minister Hun Sen, who is not implicated in any war crimes.

Ho said: "I went to see my father twice in detention before he died. He just sat around watching TV all day. He was tired and angry—angry that he was the only one being punished while everyone else was free.

"He said he would tell the world what really happened."

He had also threatened to expose an alleged American and British role in equipping Khmer Rouge guerrillas, long after the world knew of the genocide, to fight their communist enemies in Vietnam.

Despite his terrible legacy, little is known of the man called the Butcher. Even the organisations devoted to documenting the crimes of his regime differ over his background—from his age to the number of children he had.

Born to an affluent farming family in the Takeo region of Cambodia, he spent time studying as a Buddhist monk but abandoned his monastery and his family to join the revolutionaries, prompting his own father to call him a "peal", a contemptible man.

Ho was one of four daughters and three sons born to Ta Mok and his wife, Uk Khoem, who was also his cousin.

She said: "Nobody knows why he went from being a good monk to a fighter. He was not around much when we were children because he was always in the jungle, training and fighting. He rose through the ranks quickly and became a commander.

"I wanted his attention but there were seven of us and he did not have much time for us.

"When the Khmer Rouge were in power we lived in a big house and we had everything you could want. We just lived happily without knowing all the horrible things that were happening. Father made sure we were looked after, but I do not remember him being home much at all.

"When he was, we never had any problems in the family. He was not violent with us."

Ho's husband, Vin, made commander of Pochentong airport by his father-in-law, died 15 years ago when the JCB he was driving hit a landmine.

Now Ho earns less than a dollar a day, selling rice wine and tins of food from her shack in a village 40 miles from the former Khmer Rouge stronghold of Battambang.

It is a hard life for the 175 villagers, all former Khmer Rouge cadres and their families, cut adrift by history and still reviled by the nation.

Some are known to have committed atrocities, including one woman now running a beer stall who worked in a concentration camp.

Others were simply foot soldiers, indoctrinated as children. For them, the future is bleak no matter what happens at the tribunal in Phnom Penh.

Ho said: "I worry about our children. They are being punished for the sins of their parents.

"My daughter has no chance of ever getting out of here—no education, no job. We have been left to rot here.

"I had to read about the slaughtering and torture in the papers. We lived in a big house without knowing about all those horrible things."

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