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Too Much Too Young

By Jon Swain

Interview conducted April 2001

Loung Ung was a child when war broke out in Cambodia. And while her family perished, she was trained to kill. Jon Swain, who covered the conflict, hears her harrowing story.

The killing fields of Cambodia are a thing of the past. Pol Pot, whose drive to create an agrarian utopia killed millions and turned it into a madhouse, is dead. The country today is an important stop on the Southeast Asian tourist trail, and no longer seemingly eternally at war with itself.

But Cambodia is a place that takes over the soul. The memories fade slowly, and those who knew it at its worst, during the years of war and the Khmer Rouge tyranny a quarter of a century ago, are drawn irresistibly back to confront their physical and emotional wounds.

Long after the soldiers have gone, the legacy of war remains: in the cripples on crutches living on hand-outs, in the landmines, in the pain of memory, and in the shrines of skulls to those murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Not even the sheer heavenly beauty of the fabled temples of Angkor, the golden age of the Khmer empire that once dominated much of Indochina, will erase them.

So that is why a poised and articulate young woman is sitting across from me in a Thai restaurant in Washington DC, where she now lives, talking about her trips back to the sad little country of her birth, and of her unbearable guilt and anguish at having survived the killing fields and making a successful life for herself in the United States when so many of her close family perished.

"If you have ever been so hungry that you watch a body disappearing, you are never going to forget it," says Loung Ung. "If you are ever so hungry that your brother has to steal corn, you will never forget it. If you have ever been so hungry that you look at your brother and sisters and you see death on their faces, you will never forget it."

Loung is an anti-landmine activist, her way of giving something back to Cambodia, the country of the one-legged man. It has between 4m and 6m landmines, and each day brings a fresh crop of killed or maimed.

She is the national spokeswoman for the Campaign for a Landmine Free World, the Nobel-prize-winning organisation sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation in Washington, which runs Cambodia's biggest prosthetic clinic and has others in conflict zones across the world. "Wars end but landmines don't go away," she says. As a Cambodian survivor who is articulate and telegenic, she is an inspired choice for the job, bringing a human face to one of the world's most intractable problems. A harrowing memoir of her childhood that is just published in Britain speaks for all Cambodians who suffered and perished under the Khmer Rouge. As many as 2m people were executed or died from disease and starvation during the Pol Pot years, nearly a third of the population.

First They Killed My Father is based on diaries Loung kept as she grew up later in the US. It is written in the present tense, from a child's viewpoint. It is so sharp with pain that when I first read it, the words plunged into me like a knife.

"I stole, I hurt people and, first of all, I survived when other more saintly people like my sisters died. I really fought to survive when I didn't know what life was all about, and I always felt bad - it makes me emotional just thinking about it," she says. "In one way or another it is always before my eyes."

In one incident Loung tells how, in May 1978, as an eight-year-old, she stole a fist-sized ball of rice from a dying woman, even though she was only a child herself and nearly dead from starvation. "The old woman I stole food

from, that was probably her last meal, and I took it from her and I don't know how to make that up. I just don't know how to. I think survivors have guilt, and I have more guilt than others because I judge myself. I feel bad the woman died with an empty stomach."

Today, Loung lives in a neat world where people weep for a single death, do not hear gunfire, and almost nothing happens to disturb the peaceful flow of their lives. As she lays her soul bare, her eyes burn with a sombre fire and there is a tremendous determination in her voice. The waiter brings us food. But I do not notice what I eat, as the raw reality of her story intrudes.

Almost exactly 26 years ago, on April 17, 1975, Loung was a tiny, defenceless five-year-old in Phnom Penh, the besieged Cambodian capital. A horrendous five-year-long civil war between the American-backed Lon Nol government and the communists Khmer Rouge peasant army, led by Pol Pot, was drawing to a close.

The Americans had closed down their embassy and evacuated their staff in a helicopter-borne operation a few days before, bringing an ignominious end to their violent, destructive involvement in a once gentle land that they had pounded with B-52 strikes. As the Khmer Rouge closed in, there was fear and panic in the street, which Loung was too young to remember. Her earliest recollections are idyllic: of a city untouched by war: of the third-floor apartment across from a cinema in a little street near the central market, where she was raised, the second youngest of a middle-class family. Vividly present in her mind still are the outlines of two beloved faces: those of her Chinese-born mother, and her father, part Cambodian, part Chinese, who was a senior officer in the military police. In many respects they were a privileged family, with a decent home, a car and food to eat. As she talks about her family, the childhood visions return and her eyes blink at the memory.

With my eyes half-closed I, too, can see scarred and war-battered Phnom Penh again. Thousands were starving or living on hand-outs and the hospitals were heaving with untreated wounded. Yet despite the filth and hunger it had something of the air of a French provincial town—everyone pedalled home on bicycles, and the street slept in sun-struck silence at mid-day. I was often down at the central market. Who knows, I might have walked past the little Loung, perhaps as she played hopscotch with her siblings in the street near the hotel where I and other journalists who covered the war lived.

That was Loung's life, until that fateful day when the Khmer Rouge overthrew the Lon Nol regime and gained control. Immediately after taking the city they drove its 2m people out in the countryside. Loung and her family joined the exodus streaming out in every direction, on a forced trek into the unknown. From that moment on, life for Loung, and all those dear to her, turned into a desperate struggle for survival.

During the next three years, eight months and 21 days, until they were overthrown, the Khmer Rouge held Cambodia in a paralysing grip. Loung became part of a dehumanised labour force, toiling hour hours in the fields. She knew starvation, disease and violence. She had hunger stamped on her face, but the endlessness of the nightmare never quite crushed her will to survive.

Loung lost both her parents, an older and a younger sister and 20 relatives to the black-clad Khmer Rouge. Her father, whom she revered, would have been killed immediately had the Khmer Rouge known that he was a high-ranking officer under Lon Nol, for they targeted anyone suspected of working for the pro-American regime: intellectuals, professionals and especially soldiers. "When my father came back home it would be so late. He would be so tired and his body so emaciated that when I could get close to his body, it wasn't my father's body any more. I could not sit on his lap because I would hurt him, because my bones and his bones would grind on each other," she says. Starving and constantly in fear of discovery, the family moved from village to village westwards, away from Phnom Penh. They worked a 12-to-14-hour days in the fields. Loung's father passed himself off as a simple worker, but after two years he was recognised and betrayed. One day two soldiers came to the labour camp where the family was living and said he was need to help pull an ox cart stuck in the mud a few kilometres away. He knew it was journey's end. Loung remembers him standing up straight, his shoulders square, and telling the Khmer Rouge soldiers he was ready to leave with them.

"His arms tight around me, pa holds me and kisses my hair," she writes. "It has been a long time since he has held me this way. My feet dangling in the air, I squeeze my eyes shut and wrap my arms around his neck, not wanting to let go. 'My beautiful girl,' he says, as his lips quiver into a small smile. 'I have to go away with these two men for a while.'" And with that, he leaves and never returns.

Soon after, Loung's mother realised the Khmer Rouge would come back and kill the rest of her family, and that her children, except the youngest, would survive only if she sent them away. To Loung at the time, it seemed cruel, and she ran up to her mother, reaching out with her hands and pleading to be allowed to stay. But her mother turned her around by her shoulders, pushed her out of the door and said: "Get out, I don't want you."

"I became very angry. I hated my mother for doing that," recalls Loung. "Now I realise it was her incredible strength and courage and sacrifice that saved me and allows me to be here today." Today Loung realises the heartache it cost her mother to send her children away to make them safe. She is humbled and guilty at her anger: "I cannot forget her dear hands that let me go." Within weeks her mother and baby sister, who was only four, had been murdered.

"One by one," she writes, "the Khmer Rouge is killing my family. My stomach hurts so much I want to cut it open and take the poison out. My body shivers as if evil has entered it, making me want to scream, beat my hands against my chest, and pull out my hair. I want to close my eyes and blank out again. I want my pa here in the morning when I wake up."

Transferred to a camp for child soldiers, seven-year-old Loung was indoctrinated, and trained to fight and kill, as well as work in the fields. At the age of eight, she learnt to shoot and use the farming implements and tools around her—a sickle, hoe, axe and hammer—as weapons, and to practise stabbing scarecrows dressed as Vietnamese soldiers. She turned into a little human robot filled with hatred and aggression.

In January 1979, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and chased the Khmer Rouge from power. The fighting enabled Loung to run away from the training camp, and after more horrors she eventually linked up with her eldest brother, Meng, and his wife Eang, who had somehow survived too. In the chaotic aftermath, Cambodia was gripped by famine and continuing conflict between Khmer Rouge remnants and the Vietnamese. Many Cambodians fled the country in search of a new life. They were afraid the Khmer Rouge might regain power and kill more Cambodians until nobody was left.

In the hope of being resettled in the West, Meng and Eang fled first to Vietnam, then took the dangerous boat journey to Thailand. It was decided that Loung, who, at nine, was still young enough to go to school, get an education and make something of herself, should go too. Because of piracy, the South China Sea was a watery grave to thousands of boat people. But Loung and her family made it and, after some months in a refugee camp, were sponsored by the Catholic Church to emigrate to the US. If Loung had not got on the boat, she says she would probably now be married with five children, just like her surviving sister, who has never left Cambodia. But the US was far from rosy. She arrived at the age of 10, speaking no English, and lived with her brother and sister-in-law in Vermont, the whitest state. "More than wonderment, it was complete loneliness," she says. "It was so completely lonely. It was so lonely that it breaks my heart to think about it. At times I thought of killing myself." She taught herself English and went to college, but the war did not fade away, so she started writing the diary that has formed the basis of her book.

Loung has learnt many things from those awful times; above all, that nothing is so tenuous as our hold on life, and of the importance of speaking out. "I came from a country where our powers were taken away one by one. I could not do anything about my parents' deaths. I could not do anything about my sister dying of starvation. But I have the power to do something now. I think in a western culture people give up their powers too readily, and it frustrates me no end." She was silenced by the Khmer Rouge but she is no longer silenced now.

As Loung travels up and down her adopted country, talking about the landmines issue in colleges and schools, her chilling depiction of what her family went through has encouraged other Cambodians who were brought to the US as children to face up to their roots. On April 17, the anniversary of the Khmer Rouge's capture of Phnom Penh, at a candlelit vigil for the victims of the killing fields, she told them: "Cambodia is your heart. America might be your home, but Cambodia will always be a part of your soul."

The book has enabled Loung, too, to let go of the hate she harboured for so long, and to enjoy a new-found wisdom. Often she gets a feverish desire to return home. "I love going back, but it is still a mountain to climb each time," she says. She returns, above all, to see her sister and other surviving family members, who live a simple life in a village outside Phnom Penh. She is besotted by her baby niece, every bit as precocious and eager-faced as she was as a child in Phnom Penh. Perhaps at times she sees

herself in this other happy little girl who also likes to play hopscotch in the street.

Cambodia is at peace, at last. But the memories of what the Khmer Rouge did when they stole her childhood and killed her parents endure. Loung is now 30. Life is good, on the whole. She knows that the worst day in her life has probably already happened. "You only have two choices: you give up or you go on. My lifetime of scars will always be there. I'll always miss my parents. I get angry and emotional about it, and that is something I have to go through for a lifetime. My soul is in Cambodia. My conscience is in Cambodia. When I have to make a decision on ethics, I think to myself, 'I don't want to lose my own roots,' so I put myself back in a Khmer Rouge situation. The decision I'd have made then versus the decision I'd make now has to be very different."

She knows she is not the person she was. But she will never allow herself to forget that once it was all so different and she was a hollow-cheeked, ragged, barefoot and hungry-eyed orphan scavenging for food in a world gone mad.

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