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Resolution, Not Revenge

By Sophary Noy

Nut Pann is the second child in a family of six children in Salao village, Romny sub-district, Rovieng district, Preah Vihear province. His father Sao Nut died during the Khmer Rouge regime. His mother Sokh Keo lives in Preah Vihear. Nut Pann, who is now 44 years old, lives in Stung Treng district, Stung Treng province. Although Democratic Kampuchea was toppled nearly 30 years ago, Nut Pann still remembers clearly the day when the Khmer Rouge militiamen took his father out to be killed and the persecution of his family by the Khmer Rouge. To Nut Pann, it seems that these events happened only recently.

When the Khmer Rouge soldiers took over his home village in 1975, Nut Pann was a boy of 13. He helped his parents work on the farm to earn a living.

In 1977, the Khmer Rouge established village-based militiamen units. In the same year, they began evacuating people out of villages. Nut Pann's family was evacuated to Chy Oak village, Romny sub-district, Rovieng district. In 1978, the commune-based militiamen suggested that Nut Pann join the youth mobile unit at Kampong Sralao sub-district. After he joined, Nut Pann had to live far from his parents. He was transferred from place to place to work, following the mobile unit in Chhiep district, Preah Vihear province. The mobile unit he worked for had 50 members and their duties were to dig canals, build dams in the dry season, and cultivate rice in rainy season.

Having worked in the mobile unit for three months, Nut Pann's shoulders became swollen and his wrist was sprained because the pails of soil he carried were too heavy. Thus, Nut Pann asked his unit chief for sick leave. After the chief gave his permission, Nut Pann stayed in the district hospital where he met his grandfather, who was also being treated there. A few days later, the Khmer Rouge medical workers came to tell Nut Pann that his grandfather had recovered from his illness and was ready to leave the hospital. But the cadres had lied. Soon thereafter, Nut Pann's family started looking for his grandfather at the hospital. Nut Pann was surprised to learn that his grandfather had not returned home. It was a sign that his grandfather had disappeared forever.

One day in 1978, Nut Pann's older brother came to find him and said that their father had been taken to be killed by a militiaman named Chann Ning, who was also their distant relative. Having heard this terrible news, Nut Pann quickly asked permission from his unit chief to go to see his father. The unit chief, however, denied his request, saying, "Nobody commits such killing here." However, Nut Pann kept begging the unit chief until he was granted permission.

He rode a horse to meet his mother at Chy Oak village and learn what had happened to his father. Nut Pann's mother said, "Your father had been killed by his second cousin, Chann Ning, and other two militiamen who came here. They said they were taking your father to drink sour palm juice and your father agreed. Just after Chann Ning had killed your father, he came to your brother and said, 'Tell my aunt [your mother] that I have killed her husband.'"

Nut Pann's father and other five men were killed at the same time – around midnight – in a forest near Prey Torting Pagoda in Chy Oak village, Romny sub-district, Rovieng district. Nut Pann's mother stole into the forest to look for her husband's body and she found a rotten piece of foot. She concluded that it was her husband's foot because she recognized the shoes he wore. Her husband's body must have been eaten by wild animals, leaving only a rotten piece of foot. Nut Pann's mother took her husband's foot, burnt it, and collected the remaining ashes to keep. When Chann Ning saw Nut Pann's mother doing this, he threatened to kill her. Luckily, Nut Pann arrived in time to save his mother from danger.

According to Nut Pann, the place where the Khmer Rouge killed his father and other villagers became a mass grave that is 20 meters long and 5 meters wide. He and other villagers think that this mass grave holds the bodies of about 35 people.

In early January 1979, Vietnamese soldiers liberated Phnom Penh. At the same time, the Khmer Rouge moved people to the west region near the Cambodia-Thai border. Nut Pann was among the people who were evacuated by the Khmer Rouge. Along the way, Nut Pann always kept his ears open, asking other people about his family. Half way to his destination, Nut Pann heard that his family was waiting for him at O Pur village, Romny sub-district. He succeeded in mingling with the crowd and making his way back to his family. In September, Nut Pann arrived at his home village.

In 1987, Nut Pann moved to Stung Treng province where he met Yi Run and married her. They have two children. Despite the fact that Chann Ning killed his father, Nut Pann and his family still consider him as their relative because Chann Ning had confessed to his bad deeds. He admitted, "I was wrong. I did kill him. I was under someone else's command. I could not resist doing such a cruel thing. It was an order from my superior."

Because this tragedy happened several years ago, Nut Pann thinks that there is no use in digging up the past and arguing over who was right or wrong. He knows that his father is dead. If he takes eye-for-an-eye revenge, Chann Ning's children will become parentless, living without the warmth of their family.

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