

April 17, 2005

LIVES

One Way Out

By CAM YOUK LIM as told to SOPHAL EAR

On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh. The war was over, or so we thought. But instead of celebrating the end of the conflict, all citizens of the capital were ordered to leave the city. There were 11 people in our family, including my oldest sister and her husband and a nanny. At first we traveled by car, but by dawn the Khmer Rouge made us walk. We had no food or water, and soon we realized we were walking toward oblivion.

My youngest child, Sophal, was an infant, and I could no longer nurse him. I tried to give him away so that he would have a better chance of survival, but everyone was as destitute and desperate as we were. Meanwhile, my brother-in-law would not stop talking about having been a former government minister; we knew this would mean certain death if the Khmer Rouge found out, so we had to stop traveling with him. My sister and her husband had no children of their own and years before had adopted my oldest, Sangkum, who was then 12. Sangkum went with them when we split up. We never saw them again.

We ended up in Pursat province, where we worked the fields. Having been raised in the city, my husband and I knew nothing about farming. The family was starving and sick, slowly dying one by one.

In November 1975, the Khmer Rouge announced it would allow Vietnamese living in Cambodia to return to Vietnam. This was my chance. I grew up speaking Vietnamese with the servants and our neighbors in Phnom Penh, so I decided to fake being Vietnamese. People in the commune warned me it might be a trap. "Auntie, they're lying, they'll kill you when you go back there," they said.

"To stay is to die, to go is to die, so I might as well go," I told them.

We were interviewed first by a Khmer Rouge cadre and then sent to another camp to be questioned by a Vietnamese official. Shortly before the first interview, my husband, who was ill with dysentery and looked like a walking stick, died. We had no medicine, and there was nothing anyone could do to lessen his suffering. In a way, his death was merciful. He did not speak any Vietnamese and would have given away my disguise. Had we stayed with him, we might have died, too.

A Vietnamese woman, Mrs. Teuy, who was married to a Cambodian, befriended me and coached me in the language, grilling me for days. I had changed the children's names into Vietnamese names, but she said the names were wrong, that I had given boys' names to girls and girls' names to boys. On the day of the interview, I wrapped the children in blankets and made them pretend to be sick so they would not be questioned. The Vietnamese cadre asked, "Sister what is your name?" I answered in my best Saigon accent: "My name is Nguyen Thi Lan," a name I'd given myself.

They kept asking whether my husband, who had owned a small drugstore, had been a big shot. I stuck to my story. "No, he was a trader, that's all."

When at last I received permission to leave Cambodia, I was so happy. This chance to leave was like being reborn with my surviving children.

On the boat to Vietnam, we were given rice and canned milk for Sophal, the baby. Without even warming it up, I fed the poor boy until he became bloated and sick. The other children cried: "I want noodles! I want noodles!" I had no money, so I sold my last ring and bought a pot and some three-layered pork fat to make our first real meal in six months, which we ate hungrily and happily.

Once in Vietnam, we were told that if relatives didn't come to retrieve us within a week, we'd be sent to a collective farm. We were lucky. One of my sisters lived in Saigon and was married to a Vietnamese barber. He made the arduous journey to the camp and managed to reach us just in time.

We lived with my sister until 1978, when another sister, living abroad, arranged for us to go to France. Before leaving Vietnam, I located Mrs. Teuv to thank her. We were alive because she hadn't betrayed us, and it was this simple act of kindness that allowed us to escape and start a new life.

After seven years in France, we moved to Oakland, Calif. My children finished college; three of my five children live in California and two in France. Three of them are married to Vietnamese, so now I have a link to the Vietnamese through them.

Now, at the 30th anniversary of the end of the war, I have come full circle. I am visiting Sophal, who is finishing his Ph.D in Phnom Penh, the city we were evicted from on that hellish day. I had tried to give him away so that he could live, but, miraculously, we are still together. Even though we are back in a prospering and lively Phnom Penh, I still wake up in the night shivering and sweating, still in the nightmare.

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