

## Hope - Mardi Seng

*Mardi Seng was 10 years old when the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh. Because Mardi and his family were from the area around the capital, they were labeled as New People. New People could include city dwellers, civil servants, teachers, educated people, French speakers; in other words, those who weren't poor village peasants or Khmer Rouge cadres (the 'Old People') were classified as New People and thus suspected as traitorous allies of the former Cambodian government. As Mardi tells in his story, being labeled as New People was tantamount to a death sentence for much of his family. With the help of his grandmother, Mardi and his four siblings miraculously survived and escaped into Thailand before settling in the United States. Today both Mardi and his younger brother Lundi are active members of the online Cambodian community and contribute to numerous Internet resources.*

*A dedication from Mardi, Lundi, Theary, Dar and Sina: 'We dedicate this story to our grandmother. Her strength, courage, wisdom, vision, and love have been the inspirations in our lives, without which we would not be here...'*

Recently I was listening to a public radio program about Angola. The report stated that the Angolan political factions adopted a widely used military strategy among 'Third World' countries; the strategy was to starve the innocent Angolan people so that the opposition would surrender because of this act of animosity. The reporter estimated that about 1,000 people died every day from bullet-wounds, diseases, and hunger related causes. In the report, a blind five year old boy was crying; his blindness was caused by severe hunger. Compassion overwhelmed me; I wept.

In my world of peace and affluence, I am removed from the horror of war, of hunger, and of disease. But I share the pain, the horror, the anguish of children and of innocent people who have grown up in war-torn countries like Angola, Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Cambodia. In the first 14 years of my life, I saw, experienced, and tasted the horror of war which will stay with me for eternity. I would like to take this opportunity to share with you my story of war, hunger, suffering and death, but also of peace, hope and life.

My name is Mardi Seng. I was born in Cambodia in 1965. My father, Im Kao, was a junior high school teacher even though he only finished the ninth grade. My mother, Chen Id Seng, was a tailor. They were the proud parents of four sons and a daughter. I am the oldest child.

In late 1968, the war in Vietnam began to spill into Cambodia. Americans bombed the Cambodia-Vietnam border. The once unknown communist insurgent group, the Khmer Rouge, gained support and took control over many remote villages. Early in 1970,

Cambodia was pulled into the conflict; in April of that year General Lon Nol succeeded Prince Sihanouk in an American supported coup d'etat.

My father was drafted by Lon Nol's army. He spent many months at the battlefield; he came home about three to five weeks during a year. Sometimes my mother would take us to visit my father along the front. On the first visit, my siblings and I were so excited about seeing the weapons - artillery, rocket launchers, bazookas and M-16's. But that night, the excitement turned into terror and fear as the Khmer Rouge bombarded the camp with rockets and artillery. My mother comforted us in a misty earthy trench while my father left to command his company.

Beginning in May 1974, my father, his company and three other companies were put under siege by the Khmer Rouge for 11 months. During that period, they lived in trenches which spread over one square mile. They were bombarded day and night and could not walk on the level ground. One day in late March 1975, the Khmer Rouge army left the stranded Lon Nol army to assist their comrades in capturing the capital city, Phnom Penh. Four days later my father was reunited with us in Phnom Penh. He was wounded. He could not see with his left eye. But thank God, my father was alive.

April 17, 1975, two weeks after my family was reunited, the Khmer Rouge toppled the Lon Nol regime. On that same bright, warm, glorious and victorious day, a new era began: not of peace and tranquility, nor of hope and prosperity, but of suffering, torture, hunger, diseases, work camps, reeducation, and systematic killing.

On 17 April, the Khmer Rouge began evacuating and emptying people from all of the cities and towns in Cambodia. They told the people that the Americans would drop bombs in the city, so everyone had to leave. The streets were filled with a sea of faces. Traveling was slow; everyone walked. Occasionally people had to step off the street to let a GMC army truck pass by. Sadness reflected on the adults' faces. Children cried because of hunger and of exhaustion from the tropical heat. My father was weak because of his wound. My mother carried my five-month-old brother; my two other brothers and I assisted my grandparents and three aunts in carrying our belongings.

In four hours we had traveled only about half a mile. My family was silent and anxious as we moved slowly. While we were deep in thought, a Khmer Rouge soldier crept up behind and jerked my father by the arm.

'Are you a Lon Nol soldier?' the soldier threatened.

The world stopped during that eternal three second pause. 'No, I am a teacher' my father reluctantly replied.

'What happened to your eye and this band-aid?' he asked.

My mother trembled. 'A rocket landed in my school and debris hit my eye,' my father replied. As the soldier walked away, we sighed with relief. It was almost two in the afternoon - we were hungry and tired. My grandfather suggested that we could take a short break in a small abandon house along the road. The house was a beautiful white

house. A few of the windows were broken. Four or five families rested in the yard. No one was inside. We walked into the living room; there was a family of five lying there, dead. They died from multiple gunshot wounds; blood covered their faces and bodies. We walked out and joined other people in the yard. Everyone's reaction to this barbarous scene was not one of shock and horror but of casualness and coolness. I will never forget that living room.

At 3pm we were only a block away from that house. My grandfather asked me to get some water for my siblings. As I pushed my way towards a house, I saw a boy who was not much older than I was. He was wearing a large green camouflage army shirt. The shirt was not large; it was just the boy was too small for the shirt. A Khmer Rouge soldier walked up to the boy, pulled him by the collar, put his pistol against the boy's head, and fired.

April 20, 1975. Many things had happened in the last few days besides sleeping in the streets and escaping death. It would require many hours to recount the horrors, the inhuman treatment, and the unjustifiable killings – not that any killing of human life is justifiable. The Khmer Rouge's propaganda requested professors, previous government workers, educated men and women, and army officers to join the new regime to rebuild Cambodia into an utopian state. Having experienced enough suffering, many Cambodians responded to this noble calling. For the love of his country, my father joined thousands of other Cambodians on this calling that ended all sufferings: death. April 20, 1975. My father died so that my family might live.

In November of 1975, after walking 90 miles, we arrived at my father's parents' farm in a small village. My grandparents and my mother's three sisters who had left Phnom Penh with us lived in the next village, about two miles from where we lived.

On the first day on the farm, my father's youngest sister (my siblings and I did not know any of my father's family; the last time I saw them was when I was four years old) took me and my two brothers to take care our family's water buffaloes. In the field many children came to greet the newcomers. I was impressed with their vocabulary. They were very nice and proper to each other; they addressed each other as 'comrade.'

One boy asked, 'Comrade, what is your name?'

'My name is Mardi,' I replied. I pointed to my two brothers and said, 'these comrades' names are Sina and Lundi.' They broke down and laughed; we joined them in the laughter but we did not know why. Later that day, my aunt told me that I should not address my siblings as 'comrades.' I was embarrassed.

Four months had passed. My siblings and I really enjoyed living on the farm. The sense of peace, tranquility and contentment overwhelmed us. There was no war nor suffering, hunger nor material need. Life was basic and simple. But in life nothing is forever.

In March 1976, the hot and dry season began. A dining hall was erected in every village. *Angkar* 'The Organization' – what everyone called the Khmer Rouge government) wanted

to provide for all of our needs. This way, people would not have to cook for themselves; equality also could be achieved. But this was also a method of control.

Since we ate in the dining hall, many things started to change. People worked for longer hours. Young people (ages 15 to 25) worked from five in the morning until midnight. We had less food to eat even though we had just harvested a good crop. We could not walk from one village to another without a permit – not even to the next village. They started to mistreat the 'new people' (the city people like us). There was worry and fear on the adults' faces.

'Bang, bang, bang' the dinner bell resounded to break the silence of busy workers. Some men and women, with their eyes squinted and their right hands over their foreheads to block out the merciless bright sun, estimated the time of day. The sound of the bell always brought smiles on peoples' faces. The children filed along narrow paths from their homes and strolled innocently toward the dining hall. The adults – all dressed in black, some with straw hats and some with white/red or white/blue checker *krama* (a native cloth scarf with many uses) – marched toward the dining hall. The sight was both haunting and dramatic.

In the dining hall, the children sat at one end of the room because the adults complained that these children had no manners. They would stir up the soup to get the meat and leave nothing for the adults. A group of ten people sat around a table and on each table there was a bowl of soup and a bowl of stir-fry. The soup consisted mostly of vegetables and water. There was no meat. The usual lunch or dinner consisted of two or three chickens for 500 people. At the other corner of the room were the Chinese 'new people.' They always sat and ate together.

In August 1976, the rainy season started. Water covered most of the land. The grass was green; buds sprouted; water vegetation emerged from the fields. The rice patties were teeming with life - frogs and tadpoles, large fish and small ones, herds of water buffaloes and children. The children were responsible for the care of the herd of water buffaloes and bulls. In a field away from the village, while my two buffaloes enjoyed the freshness of vegetation, I chased after a frog. *Angkar* did not want us to fish or catch frogs to supplement our diets, but I was hungry. The frog tried to escape and jumped into a newly dug hole. I did not take much notice of the hole then; I was too involved with my potential dinner. I jumped into it after the frog. I got it.

Getting the frog out of the hole was not easy because the lip of the hole was over my head. The hole was rectangular in shape – it was about 2.5m x 2m. I was a little curious because I did not remember seeing it there the previous day.

In the dining hall, two days later, I noticed that I had not seen some of the Chinese 'new people'. I asked my mother where these people went, but she did not know. The next day, I went back to that hole in the hope that I would catch another frog, but the hole was filled. It was no longer a hole or even a simple grave – it was a mound of bodies. It smelled awful; 15 to 20 people rotted in that grave simply because they were Chinese.

In the next couple of months, many new people disappeared at night. When nights fell, fear and terror reigned. Many questions haunted my mind. 'What is death? What does it feel like? I am so young, I do not want to die. Why do people kill?' I did not understand the reasons for taking lives. I still do not understand. I was afraid of death. I still am. I daydreamed what it would be like to live with my two uncles in France or my other uncle in the U.S., and what would it be like to go to school. Every night I dreamed that *Angkar* killed me and my family, but I always barely escaped because I knew how to fly. The nightmares persist to this day.

Two of my mother's sisters were married in the middle of 1977. One aunt moved away to live with her husband in a nearby village. The other couple lived with my grandparents in another village. *Angkar* did not like the new people because the new people had been 'corrupted by American imperialism and need to be cleansed.' My grandparents' family and their in-laws were the only 'new people' left in their village. But even this might change, I thought.

One day in August 1977, the news spread over the village that my grandparents' family and their in-laws would be killed that night. My mother's youngest sister wailed all afternoon, saying goodbye to all the villagers. My grandmother bathed and dressed in her best dress, ready to go. At dusk four men with ropes, guns, and bamboo sticks sat only ten yards from my grandparents' hut, and waited for night fall to take the two families away. The Khmer Rouge did not use guns and bullets to kill passive, innocent people. They tied up their victims, sat them next to the grave, and hit them on the backs of their necks. Most of these victims did not die from the blow but from suffocation because they were buried alive.

At about 8pm, one of the aunts finally became exhausted from her wailing. They sat in silence, like sheep waiting to be slaughtered. In the midst of a moonless night, one could see the glow of hand-rolled cigarettes floating across the rice patties toward the group of men. A man came up and talked to those men. My grandparents and family could not hear the conversation, but the result of the conversation was life-giving. Ten minutes later, the men walked away. The family was overjoyed. My other aunt who lived in her husband's village was not as lucky, though. She, her husband, and all of the new people in their village were buried alive in two mass graves.

December 1977, a Cambodian rebel group aided by the Vietnamese government invaded Cambodia. My village was 15 miles from the Vietnamese border and only seven miles away from the battlefield. We could hear the sound of the battles. Sometimes we had to sleep in trenches because of the artillery bombardment. Vietnamese planes usually made bombing raids on the Khmer Rouge camps during the day. My siblings and I, while tending to our buffaloes in the fields, witnessed spectacular air shows. At 2pm every day for a month or two, four planes dive-bombed the Khmer Rouge camps as anti-aircraft guns on the ground fired at them.

One afternoon in late December 1977, half a mile from a Khmer Rouge camp, grassy open fields were filled with children and their water buffaloes. Children gathered near the field under trees for protection from tropical heat and played games in small groups, while the

buffaloes walked lazily and enjoyed the luscious grass. My water buffaloes were on the far side of this open field and led other buffaloes away from the herd. My two brothers walked toward the buffaloes to stop them from straying. A few minutes later, I followed. We were about a quarter of a mile away from the wooded area, entering the open field. My brothers, about 50 meters in front of me, pointed toward the eastern sky. In the midst of the deep blue cloudless sky, four World War Two T-28 planes were on a dive, not at the nearby camp but at me and my brothers in the open field. We were stunned and stood there motionlessly watching the dive. We were helpless; there was no cover. I think the pilots thought the black buffaloes were the Khmer Rouge soldiers because the soldiers dress in black uniforms. While the planes were diving toward us, we heard and saw the explosions of the anti-aircraft shells in the air. At the bottom of the bomb dive, we could see the pilots in their planes and the writing on the bombs. We fell to the ground and placed our hands over our ears because of the loud noise of the airplane engines and the explosion of the anti-aircraft shells. I was terrified. I thought that was it for me. I still can picture those bombs under those wings. But thank God, the anti-aircraft shells were fired so rapidly that the planes had to fly away.

January 1978. The Khmer Rouge soldiers had receded and camped in my village. The villagers had to move to a different village away from the battlefields. My grandfather had permission to stay in the village to tend to his tobacco crop. One afternoon, the soldiers who used our house as their camp offered my grandfather a bowl of soup. The bowl was so full that my grandfather had to drain some of the broth out. My grandfather was arrested for draining the broth and was tied upside down, hanging off a tree on his own property.

The next day, the villagers came back to the village because the Vietnamese had pulled back. My siblings and I went to the fields to tend our buffaloes. In the late afternoon, my two brothers and I came back from the fields. There was a gathering of people in our house. My mother and my father's three sisters were wailing. My father's mother was caring for my crying sister and four-year-old brother. My 84-year-old great-grandmother was lost in thought.

My mother walked up to us and said, 'They will take us tonight.'

In that moment, my strength left me; my brother Lundi jumped off his buffalo and screamed 'No, I don't want to die!' and ran away. My aunts held us and we cried. My mother encouraged us to eat so that we had strength to walk for that night. The sun was setting and Lundi was still in hiding. My brother Sina and I went to look for Lundi. We found him crying himself to sleep in an old storage hut. We took him home.

It was dark. There were about 40 family members who came to say goodbye. We awaited death with fear and trembling. The men came for us. With them was my grandfather. His arms were tied behind his back.

'I don't want to go; I want to live,' Lundi begged and ran to my great-grandmother and cried. Her eyes, filled with sorrow, stared straight ahead into the darkness of the night,

and she softly ran her fingers through his hair. Her heart was broken and she passed away later that night.

Two men tied my mother's arms above the elbows behind her back. I carried my four-year-old brother Dar; Sina held my sister's hand while Lundi carried our extra clothes. My grandfather, mother and my siblings and I were led into the darkness by four armed men. It was known to every Cambodian during that time that if one was taken away during the night it meant death for that person. We knew we were going to die that night.

We walked for two hours and stopped at this compound. To our relief, we could not see any open graves. We were not familiar with the area because it was too dark. The compound was a prison. Our legs were chained together in one of the three buildings. We were physically and emotionally exhausted from the ordeal and slept very soundly.

The next morning was an incredibly beautiful morning. We were alive. The morning sun was brilliant; the birds were singing; we were still breathing. How can I explain how I felt? Life! Life is so beautiful.

As my two brothers and I surveyed the ground, we noticed there were covered graves everywhere. Some were old; the covered ground sank a bit. Some were new; the ground heaved up and blood oozed out due to the intense heat of the tropical sun. And to our dismay, some graves were not covered at all.

We lived in the prison camp for five months. During those months we witnessed and experienced inhumane events. A few hundred prisoners came and never left. A few tried to escape but were gunned down and left to rot in an open field. Even in the midst of these trials, we still hoped; hoped for supernatural events to take place. The supernatural events did happen, but relief occasionally took place in natural ways.

One early evening in late June 1978, a monsoon rain had passed by and left a tremendous amount of water in the fields. A group of prison guards walked lazily toward our building.

'Mardi. Sina. Lundi. Come with me,' our guard called. 'We're going to the next village to find stranded buffaloes.' My two brothers and I knew that was not true because when we counted them two hours earlier; all 112 of them were accounted for. My mother knew what was going on; she tried to put my sister Theary and youngest brother Dar to sleep. A guard unchained Sina, Lundi and myself and walked us away from the camp.

The clear quiet night was incredibly beautiful; the heavens declared the glory of God. Against the pitch dark canvas of infinite space, thousands of stars radiated like diamonds. The waning moon reflected its golden rays off the water-covered fields. The scene was one of peace, tranquility and contentment. In the midst of the splendor, I forgot about my situation until Sina whispered to me, 'Did you see, there were a lot of guards with ropes, guns and shovels outside the prison compound?'

'No,' I answered. He looked at me and his face was saddened. I understood his thoughts. Tears rolled down our eyes but we did not cry. Thoughts raced through my mind.

Anguish burdened my soul but I was relieved that at least three of us would survive this insane act of genocide by *Angkar*.

We stayed at a nearby village for the night. There we told Lundi what was happening back at the prison. We tried to comfort him. In our silence, we prayed that Theory and Dar did not wake up while they took our mother away. We felt (and still feel) guilty that our mother died and we lived. But it was her wish that she should die so that we might live.

The next morning we hurried back to the camp with the hope to see at least Theory and Dar. The prison was unusually empty. With relief, we found my sister and brother. They were crying as they searched hopelessly for their mother. Sina and I picked them up and told them that everything would be all right. A prisoner told me that they had been crying on-and-off since the middle of the night because they could not find their mother when they awoke. That same morning, a guard told us to go back to our village.

In January 1979, Vietnamese overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime and established a puppet government. Seizing this opportunity, my mother's mother took her family and us to escape into Thailand. While waiting for sponsorship, we lived in refugee camps in Thailand for one and a half years.

December 23, 1980. My family arrived in Michigan under the sponsorship of Millbrook Christian Reformed Church. The Church has provided an incredible amount of support to my family. With the Church's and family's support and direction, my three brothers, sister and I have thrived in this great country. We have been active and involved in our church, community, and school activities. Lundi and Theory, who did not know a word of English upon their arrival to this country, both placed in the annual National Spelling Bee for the city of Grand Rapids, and were mentioned in the United States Congress. Lundi also graduated from his junior high school as a valedictorian. Theory was her high school's class Salutatorian, while Sina, Dar and I placed in the top ten percent of our classes.

Sina is finishing up with his electrical engineering program at Grand Valley University in Michigan. Lundi, who is in medical school, graduated from the University of California at Irvine as a Biological Sciences major. Theory is in her third year in the International Relations program at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. Upon graduation, she plans to go on to law school. Dar is in his first year at University of California at Irvine, enrolled in the pre-med program. I am attending Northeastern University in Boston in an MBA/Co-op program. I have been given the honor of working for the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC) as a bank examiner for my co-op work period.

My work experience with the OCC has been a beneficial, functional, and practical experience. The people with whom I have worked are professional, capable, supportive, and amiable. I have enjoyed my OCC experience immensely. I hope to work for the OCC upon my graduation from Northeastern University. My most influential rationale to work for the OCC is to gain work experience and knowledge about the American banking system, so that someday in the near future, professional American-Cambodians like myself can go back to Cambodia to assist in rebuilding Cambodia.

I am now planning to take my grandmother and Lundi to visit my father's relatives in Cambodia. This will be the first time in fourteen years. For fourteen years, my soul has been stirred restlessly, aching to possess serviceable skills to contribute in the molding of a self-sufficient state of Cambodia. For fourteen years, my heart has uttered countless prayers for peace in Cambodia, for her well-being and for its cultural preservation. For fourteen years, my spirit has yearned to be with her, to care for her people who have agonized over the pain of wars, starvation, diseases, and experiencing the hopelessness of social and cultural annihilation.

During my preparation for this trip, emotions fly high; ideas race ceaselessly. Untenable expectations await disappointment. But in the midst of this uncertainty and anxiety, one thing is for sure; that it will not be America...

*In the time since Mardi wrote this essay, he received his MBA degree and now works as internal auditor at Fleet Financial Group. Mardi is married and has two beautiful children. Sina is currently working as an engineering manager and recently tied the knot with his girlfriend Nancy. Lundi is in the midst of his medical residency and hopes to serve his community one day... Theary has graduated from Georgetown and is now in her second year at the University of Michigan Law School. Dar is wrapping up a dual art major/pre-med program at UC Irvine, hoping to attend medical school in the future and to be a part of the Cambodian healing process.*