

Hear Me Now: Tragedy in Cambodia - Sophal Leng Stagg

Sophal Leng Stagg was nine years old when she and her family were forced to leave their home in Phnom Penh in April 1975, joining the millions of Cambodians who were devastated by the Khmer Rouge. It is for this reason that she relates the details of her experiences during the four years that she and her family lived under the oppression imposed by this brutal regime. Today, Sophal and her husband, Bill Stagg, run the Southeast Asian Children's Mercy Fund, a not-for-profit corporation dedicated to raising awareness of the genocide as well as collecting much needed funds for children in Cambodia. As Sophal says, 'I am determined to tell our story. I believe our story must be told by all survivors, again and again, to prevent a repeat of the inhumanities that existed during Cambodia's darkest years.'

Sophal's husband Bill Stagg adds the following words: 'The Cambodian holocaust, while well documented in such treatments as the movie The Killing Fields and in the autobiography by Dr. Haing S. Ngor, has been almost totally ignored outside of southeast Asia. If, however, we have learned nothing in the continuing struggle of man's inhumanity towards others, we can confidently state that such lessons in history will be repeated as long as they are overlooked by the world community. The continuing reliance upon witnesses to such events serves as a constant reminder of the need to bring them to our attention....'

'The gruesome reality of Cambodia during the years 1975-1979 awaits the exposure it deserves. Lest we forget! The enormity and brutality of the Cambodian holocaust staggers the imagination; its horrors cry out for explanation. It reminds us to what depths humanity is capable of sinking and pushes each of us to examine our own conscience and our relationship with our fellow human beings.'

Sophal, Bill and their family live in Florida.

Twenty years and what seems like a dozen lifetimes have passed since the events that I describe in the following words transpired and, although I can now look back with less emotion, the memories of that time are as vivid as if they happened yesterday. I cannot completely explain my reasons for the need to write about these experiences except as a testimony to those whose lives were lost and can no longer speak for themselves.

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On the night of 16 April, 1975 we were awakened by the terrible sounds of bombs and guns, close at hand. The explosions were so near that our house shook with each burst. To the mind of a terrified nine-year-old girl, it seemed that the gunfire was aimed directly at me. My parents led us to a shelter underneath the house and there, in total darkness, my mother clutched my sister Chan and me to her body and comforted us with her warmth and love. Although she must have been frightened as we were, her first thought was for the safety of her children. Needless to say none of us slept that night.

Early the next morning, Papa went out to inquire about the circumstances of the battle. We huddled together in one room hoping for the best, but fearing the worst. When he returned, we could tell from the worried expression on his face and the change in his demeanor that the news was foreboding. He told us that the Khmer Rouge was everywhere, marching up and down the highways waving their flags and celebrating their victory at the conquest of the capital city. Although he was clearly concerned for our welfare, my own reaction was to hope that this new development would at least put an end to the warfare and killing. Maybe by now, I thought, Cambodia would once again be at peace and my family could return to our treasured customs. I soon learned that the people I loved the most would begin to experience the worst horrors imaginable. We knew our lives would be changed forever.

What began as a hasty departure from our homes and neighborhood soon became a massed confluence of families in an ever-growing crush of frightened, confused humanity. The forced evacuation of the one million residents of the capital city had begun. This was the beginning of immeasurable pain and suffering for the Cambodian people.

By the end of 1976, I was convinced I would not reach my next birthday. The Khmer Rouge had again shown me how endless their cruelty was. Up to this time, regardless of the hardships I endured, I always found comfort in the fact I would see my mother at the end of the day. I was taken by force away from my mother and assigned to a far away work group. Now my heart was broken and the will to live was gone. Without my mother I was now unable to communicate and could only look into the darkening skies as if searching in my despair for some sort of comfort. As the stars shone with unusual brilliance, the round full moon seemed to offer a sign of warmth and sympathy. I began talking to it as if it was a loved one who was there to comfort me.

The next three years brought with it starvation, sickness and death as my companion. We endured misery which words can never fully describe and a numbness to life itself. I got sicker with each passing day. There was virtually no muscle left on my body at all, just skin and bones. My head was bigger than my trunk even though my body was

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swollen from starvation. I lost my vision and the use of my legs. I was yellow with hepatitis and was ready to die if it were not for my greatest fear – I would not die without my mother. As I lay motionless I recalled my mother's voice urging me on and not to accept death, for it was this that saved my life. The Khmer Rouge would not kill me.

Peaceful times have gone away
Long gone, so far, so far away
Let me live as I will you
Peaceful times as we once knew
The young, the old, so sad these days
So sad, so scared, are we
I have closed my eyes to run away
Run away to peaceful days
Mother please stay with me
Don't go, please stay close to me
I need you now to help me see
To see the days of peace for me
Help me find those peaceful times
The times we laughed when we were free
No more pain, be at peace.

I survived Cambodia's darkest years to tell my story – as I believe all survivors of genocide should do. It is of profound importance that our youth be made aware of the horrors that existed in our past and understand that history must never repeat itself. While public awareness is raised by such displays as the Holocaust Memorial in Washington, an enormous amount of effort in education, prevention and intervention is needed to control this devastating human disease. May the suffering of all genocide victims impact the hearts and minds of our students and teachers, making them aware of the consequences of hatred, indifference and apathy which continues to manifest itself today.

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