

# The New York Times

---

## THE ARTS/CULTURAL DESK

### **BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Chilling First-Person Tales From Cambodia**

By **RICHARD BERNSTEIN**

Published: April 19, 2000, Wednesday

#### **WHEN BROKEN GLASS FLOATS**

**Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge**

By **Chanrithy Him**

**Illustrated. 330 pages. W. W. Norton. \$23.95.**

#### **FIRST THEY KILLED MY FATHER**

**A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers**

By **Loung Ung**

**Illustrated. 240 pages. HarperCollins. \$23.**

During the three years that the Khmer Rouge tried to create an agrarian utopia in Cambodia, two million people are believed to have died from execution, starvation and disease. Two million -- a horrifying number, but so large as to seem almost an abstraction, like the distance to the nearest star. The number gains far greater psychological force with these two new memoirs, whose authors, both young girls in the Cambodia of the time, describe the terror and losses they suffered during the Khmer Rouge revolution in wrenchingly particular terms.

Chanrithy Him was 9 and living with her family in Phnom Penh when the Khmer Rouge forced the entire population of the city to evacuate their homes and trek into the countryside. Luong Ung was 5 and living with her parents and six brothers and sisters when that occurred. Ms. Him's book, "When Broken Glass Floats" (the title refers to a Cambodian proverb), takes her and her large family to a village called Daakpo in northeastern Cambodia and then, after the Vietnamese invasion of 1978 drove the Khmer Rouge from power, to a Thai refugee camp.

Ms. Ung's book, "First They Killed My Father," describes a similar trajectory, beginning in Phnom Penh and winding to a place called Ro Leap in far western Cambodia; in 1978, the surviving members of the Ung family escaped to Vietnam, and then by boat to Thailand. Both Ms. Him and Ms. Ung, who now live in the United States, tell their stories straightforwardly, vividly, and without any strenuous effort to explicate their importance, allowing the stories themselves to create their own impact. Neither of these writers speculates on why the French-educated Khmer Rouge leaders, who seized power after a long guerrilla war, forged a regime in which cruelty and murder became revolutionary values. But they do tell, graphically enough so that it is sometimes difficult to keep on reading, what it meant to be in the way of those values in the years that they prevailed in Cambodia.

**(Continued)**

**(Chilling First-Person Tales From Cambodia cont'd.)**

"I'm adjusting to my new environment, a world where formality and politeness are not a necessity -- indeed are banned," Ms. Him writes of a stretch of several months when, at age 10, she worked in a labor camp. "Instead, cruelty is the law by which the people are ruled, a law designed to break our spirits. In the name of padewat (the revolution)."

Both Ms. Him and Ms. Ung have written what might be seen as representative stories from the Cambodia of 1975 to 1978. They came from educated middle-class families, the kind of people who were anathema to the Khmer Rouge, who saw education as an obstacle to acceptance of the radical equality they espoused.

Ms. Him's father was a government bureaucrat; Ms. Ung's, a military policeman. Both were killed by the Khmer Rouge, and so, later, were their wives. Both authors also lost siblings and friends from starvation, overwork, exhaustion and disease. As children, Ms. Him and Ms. Ung knew hunger, forced labor camps, separation, the smell of corpses rotting in fields and the hatred of the tyrants who imposed this suffering on them in the name of a higher good. Ms. Him worked clearing land and planting rice in a children's work camp. Ms. Ung, at the age of 8, received military training in a military training camp for children.

"You are the children of the Angkar," the 40 children in the camp were told. The Angkar, meaning organization, was the name given to the Khmer Rouge leadership. "You are here because you are the brightest and fastest. You are fearless and are not afraid to fight. The Angkar needs you to be our future."

Both women begin their books with brief accounts of life in Cambodia just before the American defeat in neighboring South Vietnam enabled the Khmer Rouge to overthrow the pro-American Lon Nol regime and to seize power. Ms. Ung describes herself as a 5-year-old tomboy frequently scolded by her mother for her lack of manners, quarreling with her brothers and sisters and protected by her revered father. In April 1975, Khmer Rouge soldiers appeared in Pnom Penh and told people to leave the city immediately, shooting those who refused on their doorsteps.

"Why are they doing this, Pa?" one of Ms. Ung's brothers asked.

"Because they are destroyers of things," he replied.

Ms. Ung's father, saying he was an ordinary worker, survived for two years, until one day two soldiers came to the rural work camp where the Ung family was living and told him they needed his help with an ox wagon broken down outside the village. Ms. Ung's father knew it was the end.

**(Continued)**

**(Chilling First-Person Tales From Cambodia cont'd.)**

" 'My beautiful girl,' he says to me as his lips quiver into a small smile. 'I have to go away with these two men for a while,' " Ms. Ung writes of that crushing moment.

For Ms. Him, the losses came more quickly. Two weeks after the family arrived in her grandfather's village, her father and her two uncles were taken away in oxcarts for what was called orientation but what was really execution. She remembers the men of her family sitting around a table for breakfast the morning of their departure.

"Though together, they seem alone, like strangers who have never met," she writes. "Their stillness sends a strange air through the house, a sadness so heavy that it radiates like thick smoke, choking me. Suddenly I feel lonely."

Other losses followed, most painfully the unnatural deaths of their mothers. Ms. Him was told that her sick mother had been thrown down a well while still alive; Ms. Ung's mother and younger sister were shot in a field by Khmer Rouge soldiers. The authors tread lightly where their own emotions are concerned, concentrating instead on describing the grim task of survival, especially the task of finding food in a starving country. Ms. Him describes the taste of roasted mice. Ms. Ung tells how her mother was beaten when she tried to buy a black market chicken to give to a sick child. Once, she remembers, a poor man in the village killed and ate a stray dog. He was executed by the Khmer Rouge for his failure to share the dog meat with the rest of the community.

Ms. Him and Ms. Ung describe the general joy that greeted the Vietnamese soldiers who invaded Cambodia in 1978 and dislodged the Khmer Rouge from power. Eventually each made her own way to refugee camps in Thailand and to the United States. Ms. Him has worked in a clinic that studies traumatic stress disorders among Cambodian survivors; Ms. Ung is national spokeswoman for the human rights group Campaign for a Land Mine-Free World.

Neither of these books provides an overall history of the horror inflicted by the Khmer Rouge, part of a wider horror brought on by that peculiar 20th-century urge to remake human societies in a new image. The historians will one day write of the overall nature of that effort, the way it linked societies otherwise as different as Ethiopia under Mengistu Haile Mariam, North Korea under Kim Il Sung and Cambodia under the secretive chieftain Pol Pot. For now, these books by two intelligent and morally aware young women tell us what it was like to struggle to survive while others played out utopian dreams above them.

~ **RICHARD BERNSTEIN – New York Times Book Review**