

# Chosen: From Hell to the American Dream

by Saron Khut

My name is Kacrna Saron Khut. I was born in January, 1970 in a small town called Chong Kal in Cambodia. I was the first-born child of my father, Jenda, and my mother, Sarouen, but my family would welcome my younger sisters, Syna and Pratha, in 1972 and 1974. We lived on a small farm which my mother tended to while my father worked as a teacher. My father was well loved in our village and was affectionately called “Gru Jen,” or “Professor Jen” in English. My father taught children to speak, read, and write in Khmer, the national language of Cambodia. Not only was my father a beloved teacher in our village, he was also a popular entertainer. He could sing and dance, and often performed during celebrations like weddings and other parties. He was a charismatic man who seemed to be good at just about everything he did.

During the first five years of my life, conflict and civil war ravaged Cambodia. Much of this stemmed from people fighting over who should run the country and how they should rule it. During this time, the Vietnam War was underway. The United States had allied with the government of South Vietnam to fight against communist North Vietnam. As a result, United States planes dropped bombs in Cambodia believing that Vietnamese communists were hiding there. I don’t remember much of this because I was so young, but my mother told me that my family often had to hide in a bunker for hours while our village was being bombed.

Then, in 1975, a communist group called Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, seized control of Cambodia. They believed that the Cambodian “race” had been contaminated by outside ideas, especially those from the capitalist West. The Khmer Rouge aimed to “purify” and transform the country into a society made of farmers, where nobody owned private property and everyone shared resources. They did this by ordering people to relocate from the city to the countryside and to work in the fields. They viewed well-educated people, religious leaders, government officials, and ethnic minorities as a threat to this new order. They also banned the exercise of religion, popular culture, and all forms of self-expression.

Shortly before the Khmer Rouge took control of the country, many people left or tried to leave Cambodia. My family, along with some others in Chong Kal, packed all our belongings into a truck and planned to travel across the border to Thailand. However, my grandmother, Nep, fell ill and my father refused to leave her behind; so we decided to stay.

For the first few months after the Khmer Rouge was in control, life in our small village of Chong Kal went on as normal. Then, Khmer Rouge soldiers started kidnapping the people they viewed as threats. While some people were taken to prison camps and forced to work on farms controlled by the Khmer Rouge, most were killed.

One day in 1975, my father performed at a neighbor’s house to help them celebrate a special occasion. As he walked home, he was stopped by soldiers. He was targeted because he was a teacher and well-educated. The soldiers claimed they were taking my father to a re-education camp but this was not true. Instead, they

kidnapped him and killed him. My mother and our neighbors said they heard him cry as the soldiers took him from the village. I had to accept this without any room for grief. At a young age, I was trained to be numb, to show no emotion, because expressing emotion could put the life of my family and myself at risk.

Oftentimes, after one member of a family was killed, soldiers would return later and kill the rest of the family too. Thankfully, the Khmer Rouge soldiers in Chong Kal knew my family personally and decided not to kill us. Instead, my family and I were forced to move to a new village. Moving people and separating friends and family was one way the Khmer Rouge imposed their control and made it difficult for people to organize resistance efforts. During the four years the Khmer Rouge was in power, my family was forced to move four times. I do not even remember the names of all the places I was taken to.

Wherever we were taken, the Khmer Rouge expected all of us to work, including the children. Despite our work, we children still found ways to play and run in the fields.

When I was six or seven, Khmer Rouge soldiers came to our home after dark and took my mother to work at a labor camp. After that, my sisters and I went to live with our grandmother, Daum. We were scared that she would be killed like our father. All we had back then was hope. I clung to the hope that my mother was still alive and I hoped that my sisters and I would survive. I hoped every day that we would have enough food to eat. I hoped that one day life would get better. At night, I'd look up at the sky and see planes flying overhead. I didn't know who was flying the planes or where they were going. I just knew I wanted to escape the Khmer Rouge. Often, I would wish for them—whoever they were—to land, rescue us, and take us far away. I believe that it was hope that kept me alive during this time.

Food was scarce under the Khmer Rouge and we were often hungry. Once a day we would get one bowl of porridge made from rice and water. Many people starved. Even though we farmed all day, the food we grew was taken by the Khmer Rouge. The soldiers denied villagers the right to hunt, fish, or gather fruit, freedoms that they enjoyed. However, sometimes I took the risk and gathered fruit or leaves for us to eat anyway. Other times my neighbor, who was a Khmer Rouge soldier, would take me spearfishing with him, and allow me to take fish back to my family.

After months of not seeing my mother, she suddenly arrived at the village where my sisters and I had been relocated. We were so happy to see her and so relieved that she was alive! She had escaped for the night to visit us and make sure we were all alright, but needed to return to the work camp before dawn so that no one realized she had left. If she had been caught by the Khmer Rouge, they would have likely killed her.

During her visit, my mother told my grandmother where she was being imprisoned. Not long after that, my grandmother overheard that a group of laborers were being moved by the Khmer Rouge in the same direction as my mother's work camp. I asked my grandmother if I could go with that group of laborers to see my mom and she said yes. I traveled with the group of laborers, but when we were about halfway to my mother's camp, they were told by the Khmer Rouge that they were now being transported to a different work camp in another direction. The laborers tried to show me the way to find my mom, but I quickly got lost. Suddenly, I was all alone, deep in the forest.

As a seven year old, the forest at night was like a scary jungle. I feared that I would be eaten by wild animals or haunted by ghosts. Once I left the forest, I saw a village and ran to the nearest house. There I met a woman and I told her that I was lost, alone, and looking for my mother in a nearby work camp. She knew exactly the camp I was talking about and took me there. When I found my mother, she was shocked; “What are you doing?” my mother asked me. I will never forget the feeling of pure joy I felt seeing her. I had missed her so much.

I couldn't live with my mother at the work camp, so she looked for a safe place where I could stay. She found a Buddhist monk living in a nearby town, Preyllion, who offered to shelter me, my sisters, and my grandmother. I called him “Uncle,” and he changed my name from Kacrna to Saron and he changed my sisters' names too. Even though my family was not actually upper class, the names Kacrna, Picnitha, and Pratha sounded like they were names for wealthy people, which was dangerous. In Pol Pot's Cambodia, the upper class was seen as the enemy of the people by the Khmer Rouge who hoped to create a classless society without money or private property. He told me that my new name would rhyme with my mother's name, Sarouen, and sounded more ordinary. He changed Pratha's name to Syna and Picnitha's name to Sinath.

Uncle was also a target for the Khmer Rouge because he was a Buddhist. The Khmer Rouge were opposed to religion and thought religious leaders needed to be killed just like intellectuals or rich people. Under the Khmer Rouge's rule, many temples were destroyed and many monks were killed. Uncle was only safe because he was beloved by the nearby townspeople who protected him from the Khmer Rouge. My family lived with Uncle in Preyllion for almost two years until the end of Pol Pot's reign of terror. During that time I did whatever I could as a young child to help my family survive and luckily, we did.

In December 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia. In some ways, the war with Vietnam was a relief. The Vietnamese pushed the Khmer Rouge back and it was clear that the government that killed my father and separated my family would soon be toppled. We were also less stressed about the Khmer Rouge soldiers coming at night to take us away. But, it was still war. The village that my family was living in was often bombed or shot at and we had to hide in trenches, riverbeds, or bunkers to take cover. I still remember seeing the soldiers firing their guns and shooting rockets at each other. I always knew what side the soldiers were on because all the Khmer Rouge soldiers wore black. While Pol Pot ruled Cambodia, everyone had to wear black; it was the national uniform. The war only lasted about a month. By January 1979, the Vietnamese military captured the capital city of Phnom Penh and the Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot was forced to flee into the jungle. The Cambodian genocide was over. While in power from April 1975 to January 1979, the Khmer Rouge killed between 1.7 and 2.2 million Cambodians, about a quarter of the country's entire population in 1975.

My mother came to live with us and Uncle after the labor camp she was in was abandoned by the guards. However, my mother soon left to check on the family we left behind in Chong Kal and to see if they survived. Uncle found a bike for my mom to use on the long journey and she set off to Chong Kal on her own. When she arrived, she reunited with one of her brothers and a cousin. My mom's brother—my biological uncle!—and cousin traveled by cattle drawn carts back to Preyllion to pick up me, my sisters, and my grandmother. The journey home took us a couple weeks. My sisters and I were lucky and got to ride in the carts with our belongings, but the adults had to walk alongside.

Once we were back in Chong Kal, we discovered that my mother's older brother, my uncle Khean, had been sending letters to his friends in Thailand asking about my family during the genocide. Khean and his family had escaped the Khmer Rouge and moved to Portland, Oregon. They had been sponsored by another relative who had immigrated to the United States prior to Pol Pot seizing power.

Once Khean found out we survived, he contacted some friends in Thailand who could help us leave Cambodia. We joined a large group of about 100 people who were all fleeing the country. We had to travel by night to avoid being seen by soldiers. To reach Thailand, we needed to climb the mountains that separated the two countries. Unfortunately, we ran out of food early in the climb and I ended up eating leaves, plants, or anything I could find. As our journey neared its end, one of our guides gave us bad directions and my family traveled to the wrong refugee camp. We were also briefly separated from one of my sisters but we finally found her. Eventually my family gathered in a field outside Lompouk, the refugee camp where we originally planned to meet. We had made it.

My formal education began when I was 10 years old and we were staying at refugee camps in Thailand. At the second refugee camp we stayed at, Chon Boree, I met some teachers who survived the genocide. Miraculously they still owned some books and volunteered to teach me and the other kids the Khmer alphabet and how to read a little bit. Looking back now, I'm so thankful for those months of education at Chon Boree camp. Despite the Khmer Rouge's efforts to destroy Cambodian culture, those teachers and their books survived. Cambodian culture was not erased.

In January 1981, my family and I left the refugee camps in Thailand and flew to Portland, Oregon. At the time, I knew nothing about the city. All I knew was that I was traveling to America. It was winter when we arrived, so it was cold and the trees had no leaves on them. I was so confused and thought they were all dead! Not long after our arrival, there was a snow storm and it was the first time in my life that I had ever seen snow.

At first, we stayed with my Uncle Khean, who sponsored our immigration to the United States. He had a big family so there were many of us living in his house. After a couple of months, my family was able to move into our own apartment. My mother started working as a seamstress. She met a man named Craig Buley who wanted to start his own company selling outdoor gear. She started to work for him and sewed fishing and hunting vests. At the same time, my sisters and I started school at Richmond Elementary in Southeast Portland.

I spoke almost no English and had a hard time learning in school because I couldn't understand what the teacher was saying. Still, I refused to let the language barrier hold me back. I used music to learn English. I used to love the songs "Beat It" and "Billie Jean" by Michael Jackson and the songs "Eye of the Tiger" and "Survivor." I also started the English as a Second Language (ESL) program when I was in fifth grade. Music was also important in my life because it helped me stay connected with Cambodian culture. I felt like I knew very little about my own culture due to the Khmer Rouge's efforts to destroy Cambodian art, religion, and culture. This is why the Cambodian music idol, Sinn Sisamouth, became very important in my life.

Sisamouth wrote and performed music during the 1960s and 1970s and helped spread Cambodian music and culture around the world. I think he sounds something like a mix between Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra. I listened to his music to reconnect with Cambodia. His song lyrics helped me imagine different places, waterfalls and Cambodian flowers. Sinn Sisamouth disappeared during the Cambodian genocide and was most likely killed by the Khmer Rouge because he was viewed as a threat due to his fame and success.

With the help of music, ESL, and my own determination, I quickly learned how to speak English fluently. In fact, I excelled in school. I graduated from Cleveland High School with honors. I went on to attend Portland State University (PSU) and earned a degree in art and architecture. In 1996, the same year I graduated from PSU, I became a United States citizen. Ever since, I've made sure to vote in every local, state, and federal election. Voting is important to me because I know what it's like to live in an authoritarian country where the people don't have a voice.

After college I worked as an operations manager, first for FedEx Ground and then later for Intel. In 2009, I left Intel so that I could open Portland's first Asian sports bar, "Good Call." The bar closed after a year and a half, but I refused to give up on my dream to own a restaurant. I went on to open Mekong Bistro, a restaurant and bar that serves traditional Cambodian and Southeast Asian food. People come to sing karaoke, dance, and enjoy a delicious meal. My mother helps me run the restaurant and I do most of the cooking. Mekong Bistro has become more than just a restaurant for me though. It is a community, a family. People know each other's names when they come in.

Portland's Southeast Asian immigrant community has become a very important part of my life and it is important to me to help bring people together. In 2015, I organized Portland's first "Family New Year in the Park" event. It brought 3,000 people from the city's Lao, Thai, Burmese, Hmong, and Cambodian communities together at Glenhaven Park for a picnic to celebrate and share our cultural heritage. Since then, the event has grown dramatically each year. In 2019 close to 10,000 people attended!

While I have built myself a new life in Portland, I have never forgotten about my home in Cambodia. Generally, people in Cambodia are poor and I want to give back to them as best I can. I have raised money to help Cambodian orphanages and to build water-wells. I even bought a tractor for an orphanage in Siem Reap.

In 2007, after thirty years away, I decided to return to Cambodia. Despite the horrible experiences I faced during the Cambodian genocide, I still missed my country of origin and wanted to reconnect with all the family I had still living there. I traveled to Chong Kal with my mother and youngest sister. Upon arriving, I noticed that there were large mounds of trash scattered in and around the Buddhist temple. When I asked my aunt why there was so much trash, she shrugged and said that there was no infrastructure or services in place to remove it. I decided to gather all the children I could find and offered to pay them if they cleaned up the trash. Soon every kid in town was lending a hand and the Buddhist temple was clean again.

Since then, I've traveled back to Cambodia another four times. During one of these trips, I met the widow of Sinn Sisamouth! Sadly, since Sisamouth's disappearance, his widow, Khao Thorn Ngot, has lived in poverty.

I decided to create a CD of people singing Cambodian music and started selling copies online for \$10 in an effort to help her. I raised over \$1,000 and when I traveled back to Cambodia in 2008 I gave Khao Thorn Ngot the money.

I have never forgotten the hardships I faced during the Cambodian genocide. I will never see my father again; however, I have worked hard to make the world around me a better place by spreading love and generosity and building community. Despite the difficult memories I have from Cambodia, I still want to stay connected with my home country and celebrate Khmer culture. In Portland, the Southeast Asian community and Mekong Bistro have helped me find a place where I belong.