



RESIDENTS OF PHNOM PENH CAMBODIA CHEER KHMER ROUGE SOLDIERS ON APRIL 17, 1975, BELIEVING THAT NORMAL LIFE WOULD RETURN WITH THE CIVIL WAR OVER. THEY WERE WRONG. (Photo by Roland Neveu)

My Journey to the Righteous Man Was Through the Killing Fields of Cambodia

A True Story by Bunthy Scott

I was born in Cambodia to elite Buddhist parents during our 1967—1975 civil war. Because of the struggles faced by a large number of forgotten, unheard of, poor villagers, Cambodia fell to a cruel communist regime known as the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge, comprised primarily of people from the lower classes, orchestrated a rebellion and took over the country, one village at a time. During their rule over the next four years, one of the harshest of any Marxist government in the 20th century, over 1.7 million Cambodians died, and many of the country's professional and technical classes were exterminated.

Because of religious, educational, and professional stigmas, my parents, siblings, and I were forced to evacuate our home with only what was on our bodies at that moment. I walked without shoes, over rough, hot, gravelly roads from the city to an unknown destination for days during a heat wave. I begged for mercy. I couldn't understand why this was happening. Was it because I had stolen money from my parents to buy friendship from the poor people camping on our land? I promised not to do that again if I could go back home. The heat was unbearable; everything was blurry. Suddenly, I saw a beautiful man in white with a cane walking near me. I called him "Tevta," the



GROUPS OF CAMBODIANS HEAD TOWARDS VIETNAM AND THAILAND TO ESCAPE THE KHMER ROUGE. (Archival photo-VnExpress)

Righteous Man. He was surrounded by sun rays. I collapsed.

OUR LIVES SPARED

When I woke up, we were under a shady tree. My siblings had drinks, steamed white rice, and salted fish to eat while my parents were braiding coconut leaves to build a hut for us. Then I recognized a couple whom my parents had taken in five years ago because the woman had been disowned by her parents and the community for falling in love with a servant. The man she loved was facing serious sickness when she asked my parents for medical care in exchange for them working as servants until the medical bills were paid off. My parents took him to be treated by a doctor who was our family friend, but the couple never had to pay my parents back. They joined the Khmer Rouge afterward.

Now, five years later, when my dad was seeking help for me after I collapsed, he found out that the couple had become Khmer Rouge nurses. They asked Khmer Rouge group leaders to add us to that village's group, saving our lives. I heard that if I hadn't gotten sick at that moment, we would have been executed with other unlucky ones. Members of elite groups—educators, Buddhist practitioners, doctors, bankers, paid servants, land owners—were executed cruelly or died from starvation or heat exhaustion. Regardless, our lives were spared.

IN THE FIERY FURNACE BUT NOT ALONE

My parents and we children were separated from each other to work in the rice fields, something that I had never been exposed to before. Three-year-olds

and under stayed with their mother. I was in the six-year-old group. I was afraid, sad, and starving. I missed my parents and siblings tremendously. For the next five years, I faced brutality—I was tortured frequently because of my weakness.

I was just six years old when guards tried to suffocate me with a plastic bag for stealing salt. With the bag tightening over my face, I saw “Tevta” (the Righteous Man) appear in front of me again. My curiosity about his strange beauty made me forget the reality. When I came back to consciousness, the torture was finished, and I found myself lying alone on the ground, alive and breathing.

A few months later, members of my work group and I got caught trying to capture small shrimp with our shirts in the dam that we were building. We were stripped and tied to poles above fire-ant nests. The burning and itching from the biting ants was unbearable. Again, “Tevta” the Righteous Man appeared. Somehow, I zoned out. When I awoke, I was off the pole, lying under the shady leaves of a coconut tree.

Life continued to be so miserable that I did not know the date or time. Every minute seemed unending. I forgot how old I was, and my body became nothing but a connected skeleton. “Tevta” didn't appear again for a very long time.



CAMBODIAN GENOCIDE TREE DECORATED AS A MEMORIAL WITH COLORED BRACELETS AND NECKLACES FOR CHILDREN MERCILESSLY SLAUGHTERED AS FAMILY MEMBERS WATCHED.

My next vivid memory of “Tevta” occurred when I was forced to watch an adulterous couple's heads being chopped off with a butcher knife. Averting my eyes,

I noticed a guard near me chewing on a piece of sugar cane and spitting out the spent fiber. I was so hungry I dropped to the ground to grab it. He bashed me in the forehead with the stock of his gun. Again, "Tevta" appeared to me, surrounded in sun rays. I was able to focus on him and tune out the misery around me.



I saw "Tevta" again when I witnessed with unbearable sorrow a friend dying in my arms as I gave her a sip of my water. She smiled and then her mouth opened wide. I was told she died from heat exhaustion. The rest of us were then permitted to find a shady tree to rest under. While sitting nearby among some "moth hills,"* I cried and felt lonely. As the insects flew by, I looked into the sun's rays and saw "Tevta" on his knees making paths for moths to crawl from one hill to next. I was pleased to just see him, not caring whether he would speak to me.

REUNIONS

I zoned out for a very long time. When I snapped out of it, he was gone and so was everyone else. I was confused. I picked up some kernels of corn and a knife from the kitchen hut. I walked along a path through the moth hills up to the mountaintop, following a sound that turned out to be an owl. I was not afraid even when I came across dead bodies hanging from the tree branches. I truly believed that "Tevta" was nearby.

I was on the top of the mountain for a very long time, eating what the birds eat. Eventually, I decided to walk down other side, hoping to find my parents and siblings. I came across a mountain potato half pulled out of the ground and was trying to cut off a piece when I saw a man approaching. I ran but he caught up with me. I told him that I was looking for my parents, two younger brothers, one older sister, and four younger sisters. I was afraid to disclose

their names. He was nice and carried me down the mountain.

At the ground level, a lady screamed when she saw me. I told the man that I didn't know her. She had a child. My sister had been fourteen years old when we were parted, so I didn't recognize her as the screaming lady. It turned out the man was my sister's Khmer Rouge-arranged husband. He was our godsend, however. He knew his way around to get food, supplies, and water. Best of all, he took me to a hut to reunite me with my family. He was kind to us, regardless of the fact that he had grown up as a peasant. Soon after, the Vietnamese Cambodian coalition drove the Khmer Rouge out. People fought each other for utensils, plates, pots and pans. My brother-in-law had a wagon and two steers to pull it, so we had a chance to escape.

A PATH THROUGH THE MOTH HILLS*

That night, I had a dream of "Tevta" telling us to travel through the moth hills. The next morning, while my parents discussed which way we should go, a shadow appeared on the grass, and I knew it was from "Tevta." I told my parents about the strange and beautiful man who kept appearing to me, and they confirmed that he was a *magic man*. I told them about my dream, saying that if they walked through the moth hills, they would find treasure to trade for food and clean water. This confused my parents because the moth hills were obscured by the tall grasses and they couldn't see them. However, my mother's right eye twitched (a sign of good luck)



at that moment, so she told my brother-in-law to move in that direction. This time, my siblings and I rode in the wagon.

A bit later, guns fired, people screamed. The Khmer Rouge had come back. Before they caught up to us, the Vietnamese-Cambodian coalition troops arrived and directed us where to go. Along the path, I saw

*Cambodia is noted for "moth/termite hills." In the process of building mounds, the insects collect tiny particles of 24K gold from below ground and stockpile the precious metal in their hills as architectural supports.

many moth hills.

My brother-in-law found treasure (gold) for my mother to trade. We escaped many battlegrounds, as the Khmer Rouge kept appearing. We always rested by the moth hills. Fortunately, there was always rice-paddy water around. We couldn't stay in one place long enough to farm. My mother found a bit of 24-karat "moth hill" gold to start a trading business, but life was hard. My two youngest siblings, a one-year-old sister and three-year-old brother died from chicken pox and starvation. My parents fought constantly. My brother-in-law was in danger all the time, especially when he searched for food.

ASYLUM

My parents felt we had paid our debt for the last five years, so they sought freedom and safety. My dad wanted to escape from Cambodia and return to his motherland, Thailand. He had enough gold to pay a guide to get there. But then, my parents were convinced to seek asylum in Khao-I-Dang, a Cambodian refugee camp on the Thai border. Through some sort of "underground" network, they were able to get the gold to a guard at the camp, ensuring we would be admitted.

Soon after, a group of refugees, including my family, prepared to cross the Cambodian border, traveling under the cloak of night, staying hidden during daylight. We climbed mountains and traversed

swamps. On the night of the full moon, we stayed hidden. I crouched down in bushes and tall grasses near a mother and baby, whose

crying alerted the bandits who were searching for us. As they pushed through the tall grasses toward us, I was terrified. Suddenly, the tip of a rifle came to rest right over my head, my only protection being the leaves of the bush under which I hid. Terrified, I



called out to the Righteous Man in my head, begging for mercy. Immediately, a wind arose out of nowhere and carried the baby's cries away from us. The bandits moved on.

The next dark night, we reached the guard station near the Khao-I-Dang Cambodian Refugee Camp, which was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. Since we were late because of the skirmish with the bandits, the current Thai guards had not been paid for our entry into the camp, so we were locked out. Truckloads of armed Thai soldiers converged on us and began a shooting rampage. That was the last time I saw "Tevta" for awhile.



KHAO-I-DANG REFUGEE CENTER WAS ADMINISTERED BY THAILAND'S GOVERNMENT AND THE UNITED NATIONS.

My family crawled on the ground, one behind the next, like the moths that "Tevta" had shown me before. We clawed our way under the fences, and other refugees in the camp took

us in. The Red Cross workers arrived in the morning and gave us refugee status.

The refugee camp was like heaven. I was free from bombs, gunshots, starvation, and thirst. I was so happy to attend an English school. My Thai English teacher said we were lucky. The embassy approved us to enter the United States under political asylum since my dad had worked for the U.S.-supported government until 1975, when U.S. troops withdrew from Cambodia. They took our photos to seek a sponsor for us in the United States. A few months later, my dad was given a bag of airline tickets from a Lutheran church in the United States.

CHASING AFTER THE WIND

In mid-November of 1980, we arrived at the Greater Cincinnati airport with nothing but the Lutheran

church bag that my dad carried. We were brought to a rental house in Over-the-Rhine, near Findlay Market. My parents then followed friends to Atlanta, Georgia for jobs. Although my father had been a military payroll secretary working with the U.S. and French embassies and my mother had been a landowner in Cambodia, they worked as a janitor and a seamstress to provide for us here. Two siblings and I were enrolled in high school and were cared for by a Jewish English-as-a-second-language teacher. After high school, we were guided to go to college. We worked hard to graduate from college and prospered.

I forgot all about the sun-ray man, “Tevta,” as I lived the American dream. I was so ashamed of where I had come from that I hid it from others and somehow even from myself. With my new career as a computer software developer, I enjoyed international travel. My career and the financial freedom it afforded became my life.

A CRISIS LEADS TO JESUS CHRIST

On Friday, March 10, 2011, I reached a crisis. I was getting overwhelmed with project deadlines and production problem tickets. Frustrated, I called out—more to myself than any deity—“God, please give me a break.” Little did I know this was the last time I would ever be in that office. That evening, an enraged driver punched his car into the driver’s side of my car and we collided into a tree. Somehow, I lived.

Months later, I ended up in the hospital. Because of all of those years in the concentration camp, carrying 20 kilos (roughly 40 lbs.) of clay dirt on my head or right shoulder from ages 5 to 9, my spinal cord and joints had been compressed. The car accident led to spinal fluid not being able to flow into my brain. I had to have open-skull surgery. Just before succumbing to the anesthesia, I was shocked to see “Tevta” without the sun rays or cane. When I awoke from the surgery, my parents, siblings, and fiancé Michael kept assuring me, “We are here.” I tried telling them about “Tevta,” but they thought I was confused. Maybe I was, I thought. After all, I was an educated adult now. Science had kind of gotten to me. How could I logically explain what I had seen that morning? After



MY PASSPORT PHOTO-2009

they left, I was moved to the Intensive Care Unit.

On the TV screen in my room, there was an automatic slideshow presentation, and on it, I saw an image of “Tevta.” I yelled, “Was it you?” A nearby nurse, who “just happened” to be Christian, came in to investigate. I apologized with an explanation about that particular slide. She explained that the image of “Tevta” I had just seen was Jesus. I asked how I could find out more about this man. She took out the Holy Bible from a drawer and went over the Book of Acts with me. I will never forget that day, May 8, 2012, when I knew that Jesus had been with me since I was five and would be with me forever.

“LIKE COLD WATER TO A THIRSTY SOUL, SO IS GOOD NEWS FROM A FAR COUNTRY” *Prov. 25:25*

I have been reading the Bible ever since then, for over ten years. I have been praying for wisdom to find a church to belong to. I researched various denominations and nondenominational churches, but none seemed to click.

One day, Kelly Hibbett, a member of College Hill Presbyterian Church, and I crossed paths at Mercy Healthplex. I was struggling with learning to swim after having taken numerous swimming lessons. She asked if she could teach me how to float. A half hour later, I was swimming like a fish and she was gone. I forgot her name, but I frequently asked my friend Edye, who works at the gym, if she had seen this “angel” who had taught me how to swim, but Edye couldn’t figure out who she was.

A few years later, I was swimming outdoors at a neighborhood pool, when a fellow lap swimmer and I struck up a conversation that quickly focused in on God and my many questions about Christianity. We started to exchange numbers, and when I told her my name, she vaguely remembered me from the Healthplex. We discovered that we both knew Edye. In fact, it turned out that she and Edye are good friends and even have a “Sneak-Attack Prayer Sisterhood” at the gym. Suddenly, it dawned on me that she was the “angel” who had once taught me how to swim.



Kelly and I talked about my quest for a church to attend, and my hope to get baptized. She texted me

my fiancé to go with me. A few months later, Kelly said she'd go with me when I decided to respond to God's call on my life. That night, I kept debating whether or not to go, and making up all kinds of excuses, including how far away College Hill was and my fear of walking in alone and being judged. Then I received this text message from Kelly:

Hi, Thy. This is Kelly. It was so nice to see you at the pool this afternoon. I would love for you to come to church tomorrow if you would like to. I could pick you up at 8:30. Our meeting each other the way we did—twice—seems like it was orchestrated by God. Just too weird to be coincidental. Please let me know if you would like to come.

This time, she would pick me up. No more excuses.

On the way to church, Kelly and I talked about several favorite Bible stories and verses that had been on my mind. Miraculously, in his sermon that day, Pastor Darryll Davis mentioned every verse and story we had discussed on the way there. I was so relieved because I had been secretly fearing that what I would hear in church would be different from what I understood from my own study of the Bible—that what I had read wasn't true. That would have devastated me. When I found that I could understand everything the pastor said and that it aligned perfectly with what I understood from the Bible, I could barely contain my sense of relief and joy.



In that same sermon, Pastor Darryll started talking about baptism. Later, I found out that Darryll had been disappointed with his preaching that day, thinking it seemed disconnected and random. He wasn't even sure why he had gone into the subject of baptism and was disparaging himself for getting off topic. Little did he know, but every word he said was what I needed to hear. I especially longed to learn about baptism. I had been so afraid that I wouldn't be allowed to be baptized because a

priest at a Catholic church had told me I would not be permitted to be baptized there. Through Pastor Darryll, the Holy Spirit ministered to my heart.

The next week, Kelly and I sat in another part of the sanctuary. I felt very uncomfortable there, like I was on stage. Then she pointed out that the "cabinet" that was behind our chairs was the baptismal pool. It was so comforted to rest my head against it and dream of the day I would be baptized.

The very next week, I got to witness a baptism for the first time. I knew it was a sign for me to get baptized. My skin tingled, the hairs stood up. I knew it was the right time and that I shouldn't fear. From that day on, I couldn't sleep for thinking about it. Everything that happened was perfectly timed to answer my questions, set my mind at ease, and assure me that I needed to be baptized. God was clearly drawing me in, so I went to talk to Pastor Drew Smith.

Even before I knew him, the Righteous Man "Tevta" was with me. He had led me through the "killing fields" to LIFE. Now that I actually know him for who he really is, I want to belong to him and follow him the rest of my life. I am now ready to fully commit myself to Jesus Christ, my Lord, Savior, and Redeemer. I am eager to do his will and be a good Christian. I am excited to be baptized and proclaim my faith to the world this January 1, 2023—the first day of the new year and of my new life. Finally, I belong to someone and now have a whole new family in him. ■



BUNTHY SCOTT

LEARN MORE: Cambodia lies between Thailand and Vietnam in S.E. Asia. It is slightly smaller than Oklahoma, with a population of 14 million— over 50% are under 21 yrs old.

During the 1975-1979 rule of Pol Pot, the communist Khmer Rouge emptied cities and towns. Over



1.7 million people were killed, 25% of the population. FILM about this time: *The Killing Fields* is an Academy Award-winning, 1984 British biographical drama. Minimum age for viewing is 16 years of age.