

Khmer Rouge Country

Building Dreams in Northern Cambodia

Written and Photographed by Cord Keller

We had already been turned back by a swollen river and forced to take a questionable alternative route. The rain had beaten the narrow red dirt road into rutted slop and even with four-wheel drive it had taken two hours to negotiate the last 20 kilometers. Again we lurched to a stop, this time at what appeared to be a lake, overflowing into thick jungle forest that bordered the road. We were forced to abandon the vehicle.

I was accompanying the Cambodian contingent of Child's Dream, a NGO based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Crammed in the back seat were staff members Yem Khlok and Nary Chea, and the District Commissioner of Education plus his assistant. Yem had graciously offered me the roomy front passenger's seat so I had a panoramic view of the misshapen rice paddies and shabby roadside shops that marked the perimeters of the villages we passed on our way north from Siem Reap.

Daniel Siegfried and Marc Jenni, former *wunderkind* of the Swiss banking community, founded Child's Dream in 2003. Their mission is to develop sustainable education in the Mekong Sub-Region. I stumbled across their website and was impressed by their prolific output. In eight years they have successfully built 120 schools in Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia and are in the planning stages of 14 more.



One of their target areas was in Northern Cambodia near the Thai border. These remote districts were the final refuge of the Khmer Rouge and had all the characteristics of the Wild West. Khmer Rouge battled with government forces until the late 1990's and only recently gun-toting former members of the cadre committed murder for bounty as meager as an old motor scooter.

I had met with Daniel over coffee to better understand the NGO's choice of target. He explained that because of the hostilities both the government and the donor community had avoided the area. Little infrastructure has been put in place. The main highway from Siem Reap had been paved only five years earlier and most of the northernmost villages have no decent roads, running water or electricity. The schools were primitive at best, if they existed at all, and good healthcare was nonexistent. It was this lack of ministrations that captured his attention.

“Although these rogue districts have been overlooked by the government and NGOs they have also been uncontaminated by the cycle of dependency that they often create. All too often donor organizations will just give stuff away and disappear rather than empower people to help themselves. These northern districts not only have a great need for aid but a willingness to self-initiate sustainability.”

Yem, the Cambodian Director, was visiting the Trapeang Prasat District of Oddar Menachey Province to scout four isolated villages - candidate locations for future building. Unfortunately our expedition had come to a dead end on the banks of the flooded river and I was preparing myself for disappointment. Sinoeuy, the Assistant Field Coordinator and driver had other plans. He turned to me, smiling, “we take a boat.”

Beached by the waterside was a makeshift craft, a boxy raft with 12-inch sideboards. Five young men lay sprawled out on it while children splashed around them, relishing the novelty of their recently formed swimming hole. After a brief conversation, Sinoeuy waved us to join him, replacing the loitering men on the raft who then swam alongside, pushing us through the water.



We were greeted on the far beach by a young man at the wheel of a two-wheeled tractor,

common in rice producing regions. The vehicle is like a lawn mower on steroids, the driver steering with the two long handlebars. Like a bullock that it replaced, the tractor was attached to a wooden cart - our “coach” for the final leg of the trip. In the Khmer language the tractor is called a *ko-yun* which means “cow-motor.” I’m certain that an actual cow would have had better purchase on the muddied path than this two-wheeler. We crept along, shuddering and sliding through the mud, battered by the relentless afternoon sun.

We passed elevated wooden huts, many with traditional thatched roofing, and trimmed with bamboo fencing. Burned tree stubs, remnants of slash and burn clearing, punctured the fields of rice, corn and cassava like broken teeth. In only twenty years rampant and ungoverned logging has decimated the thick jungle forest that first lured the Khmer Rouge here.

Unbridled deforestation is commonplace throughout the country. Cambodia has one of the highest rates of deforestation in the world. Recent UN and International Monetary Fund studies have found that between 1.7 and 3.4 percent of Cambodia still consisted of what they term “primary forest” and the cutting still continues. Later that day we passed a deserted lumbering site. The fresh pile of sawdust was proof that the maverick operation had recently halted and moved elsewhere. In the village unused piles of lumber lay strewn beside the road. Many of the caches consisted of thick beams 12-14 feet long - some draped haphazardly into the ditches of monsoon water. Just one of these beams would cost over \$350 in the United States – more than half the Cambodian’s average yearly income.

After an hour bouncing on the tractor cart we arrived at Sre Kandal where we were greeted by the village chief, a soft spoken man with

neatly coifed black hair and eyebrows arched as if in perpetual amusement. We rallied around a lunch of chicken and rice then followed him to inspect the current school and meet with the village elders and parents.

Like most of the schools in the district, the building was open-sided with a dirt floor. It was packed with children. There were four classes in session, each separated from the other by only a large blue chalkboard. Outside, in the clearing adjacent to the school, a group of 45 villagers waited patiently for our arrival. Squatting silently as we approached, they appeared tense. Rural Cambodians have a class-based distrust of those they consider to be the urban elite. Was there an undercurrent of animosity? It turned out that I was sensing their anticipation. They were at the final hurdle of securing approval for a new five room school building and the outcome of this final meeting would determine its fate.

Yem stepped in front of the rectangle of painted wood that would serve as his blackboard, picked up a piece of chalk, and smiled boyishly at his stone faced audience. Yem teased them about how lucky they were to have such a bad road, and because of it he'd be forced to keep his speech short so he could be sure to get home at some point. With their laughter their attention and respect soon followed.

Yem was a teacher himself and understood the resistance of his countrymen. "The villagers often feel discriminated on. In the beginning you have to talk to them, make them laugh, make them dare to talk and convince them to come to us. It is important for Cambodians to trust."

Convincing Cambodian elders that education is important for their children is particularly

challenging. During the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror Cambodians were victimized by the misguided ideology of the Khmer Rouge leadership. The educated classes were considered to be the bourgeoisie puppets of the U.S. backed government that subjugating the peasant class. Teachers were considered "enemies of the people" and were arrested and summarily executed.

The gunmetal sky released a torrent of rain and we all rushed to the shelter of the school building. The rain pelted loudly on the aluminum roof as Yem continued. He gave them the news they so desperately anticipated. The building would begin after the rains.



Nary Chea and Yem Khok

With Nary translating, I witnessed Yem skillfully guide the people's participation in their own welfare while boosting their enthusiasm. He had a professor's authority tempered by his humility and a sense of humor. He asked them for design input, and then instigated a discussion specifying the contributions the village would offer for the construction. As the parents and elders became more and more vociferous the meeting took on the appearance of a pep rally. The final item on Yem's agenda was for the village to select a building committee and chairman. I

marveled at the proud faces of the delegates and the delight the assembly took in their election. Yem concluded the meeting by leading an arousing round of applause as he brought the fourteen committee members to the front of the assembly for a photograph.

Trapeang Prasath District is adjacent the Dangrek Mountains, an escarpment on the Thai-Cambodian border. This rugged area was sparsely populated until the early 1990s. The few original inhabitants had been forced to relocate when the Khmer Rouge defeated Lon Nol's government in 1975. The dense jungle forests of the region thwarted the Khmer Rouge's marshaling of the inhabitants so they were evacuated to work in communes in the south.

After their defeat by the Vietnamese in 1979 the Maoist forces retreated here in force. The remote location and rugged wooded terrain provided an excellent base of operations, and its proximity to Thailand was critical to the regime's survival. Driven by their animosity toward the Vietnamese and their quest for profit the Thais supported the Khmer Rouge with Chinese arms, aid relief and a market for logging. Additionally, when attacked by formidable Vietnamese forces, Khmer Rouge soldiers could simply hike six hours to safety up and over the mountains into Thailand.

After the end of Vietnamese occupation in 1989 and the withdrawal of its troops, the Khmer controlled the region for their guerilla incursions against government forces. Anlong Veng, the region's primary town and birthplace of diabolical Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot, became the capital of the Khmer Rouge and hostilities continued until their surrender and integration in 1999. Kevin Rowley alleges

in his book, *Second Life, Second Death: The Khmer Rouge after 1978*, that there exists an unexcavated site north of Anlong Veng where the Khmer Rouge executed as many as 3,000 of their countrymen as late as 1997.

Most of the village chiefs I met during the course of the expedition were former Khmer Rouge. One of them, 63 year old Chea Thuon, agreed to speak with Yem and I about his past. Chea was slim with a high forehead, and an easy smile that revealed a gold capped incisor. The tattoo on his chest, a talisman of his past, peeked out from behind his clean white button-down shirt. A thumb was missing from his trigger hand, one of three wounds he received in battle.

I was familiar with the suffering that the Khmer had perpetrated on their own people. In Phnom Penh a few days earlier I had visited the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and was still recoiling from the experience.

Tuol Sleng was a detention center where over 17,000 men and women were interrogated, systematically tortured and brutally murdered. Most of them were buried in mass graves 17 kilometers south of Phnom Penh in Choenug Ek, one of the 300 "killing fields" of Cambodia. The walls of the torture chambers of Tuol Sleng are filled with photographs that were methodically taken of each victim. Men, women and children stared back at the camera - their shocked, confused faces betraying their lack of comprehension, the utter illogic of their mistreatment. One of the rooms features a collection of dozens of photographs of the victims' executioners. It was a gallery made up entirely of young teen-aged men - schoolboys with faces of clear-eyed innocence and hint of mischief. These were the dreaded Khmer Rouge, men who performed some of the most vile and horrific acts of torture known to man.



Toul Sleng Inmate

Chea joined the Khmer Army at the age of twenty after the coup in 1970 forced out the revered King Norodom Sihanouk. Chea, like the majority of Cambodians not profiting from Lon Nol's U.S backed government, was stunned by the takeover. Although Sihanouk had repressed Communist opposition during his reign, he allied himself with the then fledgling Khmer Rouge and urged his countrymen to join them to fight the corrupt regime. Thousands heard the call and complied. Chea was one of them. He fought for the Khmer Rouge for nearly 30 years. "We were worried about being punished or arrested, so we followed our leaders. As a result of their persuasion, we all tolerated them even though they used violence and treated us badly. We never believed that the other side was any good at all."

Chea was assigned to a garrison located south of Phnom Penh where he spent most of his military career. When the Vietnamese took over the country in 1979 he moved to the safety of the Dangrek Mountains. By the late 1990's, burdened with the responsibility of a family and disillusioned with the Maoist cause, he put down his gun. Rather than returning to the village of his youth, Chea stayed in the



Toul Sleng Executioner

forest to make his new home.

"For me, I decided to stay here, for I had no land in my hometown like our Khmer land here. When I arrived there was only jungle. There were only paths for walking but the natural resources here enabled me to earn enough to feed my family." Chea homesteaded the unregistered land. He cleared the jungle, built his first home from the cut trees and planted his rice fields. In time he was able to take official ownership. There was nothing about Chea's character that betrayed a morbid past. Like most of the Khmer Rouge who have integrated back into Cambodian society he denied any knowledge of the atrocities of his comrades. "I didn't know about the murdering or starving of the people. We were in the army and soldiers aren't given information and we never visited the people at all."

In order to control their followers the Khmer leadership discouraged intercourse between troops, fomenting distrust between them that forged a greater allegiance to Angkor, the anonymous leadership of the Khmer Rouge movement. I asked Yem after the interview if he thought Chea was being truthful. "It's likely," he said after a moment of reflection. "Not all the Khmer Rouge are bad."

Like many of his peers, Yem is the second generation of a family that had nearly been crushed by the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge. He suffered a childhood shattered by protracted violence. In 1979, the year of his birth, the Vietnamese successfully invaded Cambodia to overthrow the despised Democratic Kampuchea, but it would be another twenty years before a lasting peace.

"At the time we had four different factions still fighting. We couldn't leave our houses at night. If you went out you'd be shot for being a spy or get blown up by a land mine. When the fighting started we would go to a hole my father dug outside our house that was covered with strong wood. We were safe there but," he added laughing, "during the rainy season the hole was full of water and frogs."

The Khmer Rouge periodically raided the village to steal food, to disrupt the Vietnamese troops and to punish the village for "collusion." But the violence and disruption the Cambodians suffered during the Vietnamese occupation paled in comparison to the horrors inflicted by the Khmer Rouge who murdered or starved to death nearly 2 million of their own countrymen.

Yem's parents survived the four years of genocide but suffer from the legacy of that horror even today. "Although she's not even sixty my mother is sick. We don't know what it is. She is so sad about what happened. She cries when she speaks of it."

The Khmer Rouge separated Yem's mother and her two young daughters from his father, placing them in different communes. They were forced to work from dawn to dusk, subsisting on meager portions of rice porridge.

"They didn't have enough food to eat and were starving. They planted some cassava around

the house and raised some chickens but you'd have to eat secretly because but if they were caught eating they would be killed for being selfish. Two of my uncles were killed as enemies of the party. They were caught getting some rice from across the village. They were arrested and sent to the killing field."

After many months of starvation Yem's mother and 3 year old sister became ill. His mother was too weak to muster adequate protein to fortify her daughter. Yem's father helped as best he could, risking his life to bring food to his wife and children. "My father walked a full night to meet my mother. He brought fish or whatever else he could find then turn around and walk back before he was noticed missing in the morning." These clandestine reunions came to an end when Yem's father was reassigned to a gravel production detail for "crimes against the people." Everyone knew that no one returned from the quarry alive. It was a death sentence.

"My father's job on the commune was as ox-driver. He had to transport rice and firewood. He had some trouble with some men and they reported him, accusing him of crimes like sitting on the bags of rice while driving which was not allowed."

Yem's father survived by secretly trapping fish at night, but his daughter did not. It was a loss neither he nor his wife would ever overcome. The memory of the sister Yem never knew is the touchstone for the unfathomable suffering of his parents during that time.

"My mother blames herself for not being able to feed her daughter, for not being able to save her," Yem looked away and struggled for the right words, "I am helpless. I don't know how to help my mother."

The next day we visited O Svay Village, the location of one of Child's Dreams' completed schools. The village has a population of 1,375. Seventy percent of the families are former Khmer Rouge. Yem and his team first met with the district commissioner, education officers, and village chief in order to help them organize the opening ceremony for the new five room school building. Commensurate to the Child's Dream action plan the ceremony was not just a celebration but means to nurture the villagers' on-going participation in the school's operation. There would be a blessing, traditional dance, speeches, ribbon cutting and food. A dance followed these formalities, with the donors and villagers strutting out their diverse dance styles - a multinational musical free for all.



Svay Chrum Primary School

The new single story concrete school building stood gleaming in a barren lot cluttered with scrap building materials. The villagers would clean up the site, erect a fence and landscape the grounds before the upcoming ceremony. Yem met with the contractor and walked the grounds, detailing a punch list of tasks that needed to be done before the ceremony. As soon as he unlocked one of the schoolrooms three local schoolgirls dashed in, giggling, and sat down together at one of the

desks that filled the freshly painted room. Second graders in their early teens, I expected the girls to shrink behind the usual reserve when we approached them. The smallest of the three broke into a wide grin when we asked their names. She stood up from her seat and bravely elaborated on each of our queries. Although her previous schoolroom was an open hut with a thatched roof and mud floor she was most excited about the new bench desks. With as many as a half dozen kids formerly jammed in a five foot wide desk she had no room to write properly.

"Now I will have room to write and I have a place to put my bag," she gushed as she slid her small book bag into the desk's shelf. "I had to leave it on the dirt before." Her excitement was ready proof of the potential for transformation that this school represented. However, while providing the children with a decent school to study is a huge hurdle, keeping them there is another.



Traditionally, education in Cambodia was compromised by the notion that schooling was a deterrent to social integration. Rural families relied on their children to help make ends meet, and schooling was widely thought to be a waste of time. UNESCO recently reported that 10 percent of Cambodian

students drop out after the first year of primary school, 50 percent are gone by 6th grade and less than 13 percent go on to high school. They concluded that only 3 percent would attend university.

In spite of these damning statistics, Yem is optimistic about the future. "It is now starting to change a lot. When I went to school there were 18 kids attending primary school. They started dropping out during secondary school. By high school there were no people, only me. They became child laborers and work for contractors, work in the rice fields. They do anything they can to help their families. They come to me and say, 'just stop'. You'll never make good money. Quit school and help your family, your mother, your father."

It takes unusual conviction for parents to embrace a new vision and support their child's educational pursuit. Often it is the children themselves that must spearhead this change, as was the case with Yem.

"I enjoyed school. I favored mathematics. My parents didn't understand. I just knew it was something I wanted. I went to school in the morning and in the afternoon I had to take care of the cows. There was no university in Siem Reap so when I graduated I had nowhere to go. All the rich send their children to Phnom Penh but we could not afford it. I was very upset because I could not continue. My friends laugh at me. 'Even after you go to high school you can't go anywhere,' they say. 'You're still looking after the cows.'"

When a teacher college opened in near his home Yem applied for a two year teacher program. He was accepted but had to convince his parents to help him. They relented on the condition that Yem contribute equally. He agreed and managed to land a menial job at a local temple where he boarded

in abysmal conditions.

"The room was incomplete. It had a roof but no windows or door, just holes. There was no light. I had to use candles and a kerosene lamp. When I left to visit my family I had to have a friend stay there or else some one else would take it over."

Yem returns to visit his village today - a local hero to those who remember him. He'll occasionally run into his childhood friends. They're still planting rice and working for contractors.

Besides the prodigious dropout rate, other factors cloud the future of education in rural Cambodia. Finding and keeping good teachers for the outlying districts is challenging. Even the more hardy teachers have difficulty adjusting to the rudimentary living conditions in the isolated villages. Their starting salaries are as low as \$50 a month, far less than their peers teaching in the cities. Because the government is unwilling to pay a fair wage it has become routine for teachers to extract money from the students for "additional services." These include the sale of test booklets, tutoring, even exam cheat sheets. The cities offers much more lucrative opportunities. Entrepreneurial teachers have a much more difficult time extracting cash from children of impoverished rural families.

We spent the remainder of the day traveling eastward along the steep rise of the Dangrek Mountains. The education commissioner had promised three other villages that we would come see their school buildings, the first step in Child's Dream lengthy evaluation process. As in Sre Kandal we were met with nervous anticipation. Word had gotten out that the NGO was building schools in the district and

everyone wanted one.

Child's Dream evaluates the conditions of the existing school buildings, the current and projected census of school-aged kids and the condition of supporting infrastructure. If the village meets these initial requirements Yem and his team must determine if there is strong village leadership and a sincere collective interest in taking a partnership role in the building and maintenance of the school. In addition to responding to the community needs, Child's Dream must determine that the individual school fits into a tiered long range development plan.

Marc Jenni, one of the co-founders, puts it this way, "we don't want to just build schools, we want to develop effective educational systems. We can't build schools here or there, we target specific districts in need. We start building primary schools, then secondary schools. With our scholarship program we can then support these students at high school and university levels. "

It was late afternoon when we arrived at our final destination. The village chief, another former Khmer Rouge, greeted us as we drove up. He was wearing all back, unsettlingly reminiscent of the traditional cadre uniform. He was smiling obsequiously and greeted each one of us individually with a *sampeah*, the traditional greeting with his palms pressed together in front of his chest. He chatted nervously with Yem as he led us to the wooden school building. Unlike the others we had seen that day, the building was well built, framed with hefty post and beam.

A mob of children dressed in their school whites packed one of the classrooms. The parents and elders sat patiently in another. They had been waiting all afternoon for our



arrival and began to pressure Yem with questions early into his presentation. Yem responded patiently to their concerns, explaining Child's Dream's lengthy evaluation process. He knew the school building was in much better shape than the others we had seen that day and was trying not to lead them on. In light of the greater need in other parts of the district, this village would probably not qualify for a new school. I knew Yem was trying to soften the blow of his inevitable decision. Some of the villagers sensed it as well.

A woman nursing her infant in the front row took the lead, "The rain comes and the floor becomes mud. My children cannot study. We need a good school with a concrete floor. I have to send them away. They cannot study here in their own village!"

"You just need to finish putting your walls up, and your windows," Yem responded. "You've built this school well."

"We built this to show you what we can do," countered the Chief.

Rattled by the intensity of their passion Yem relented, offering them a compromise. He would return without warning to continue his preliminary evaluation. "We'll need to get an accurate census of your school attendance.

Today you knew we were coming. You brought all your children. You won't know when I'll come back so I'll get a more accurate idea."

They reluctantly agreed to the compromise and the assembly broke up and melted into the haze of the late afternoon. We were obliged to accept the chief's invitation for dinner before we could begin the long trip back to Siem Reap. It was dark when we finally got underway.

Cambodians are reputed to be a dour people. They are powerless over the injustice and corruption that is routinely ignored by the wealthy elite. They contend with a daily struggle that leaves few opportunities for joy.

For most Westerners the apparent immunity of most of the Khmer Rouge leaders illustrates the resignation and lack of resolve of the Cambodians. They'd rather forget the past than dredge up the horrors of it for reconciliation. Rooted in our obsession with psychotherapeutic resolution we tend to view this complacency as denial and a failure to cope. But the circumstances of the upheavals of recent Cambodian history complicate a simplistic overview.

Today, on two different occasions, Yem sat beside former Khmer Rouge soldiers to share their food. I saw a mutual respect of men who wanted nothing more than to improve the life of the people they cared about. Yem, who is living with the consequences of these soldiers' choices, had every reason to harbor hostility and resentment. But there was none.

"I pity the Khmer Rouge," he told me. "They were tricked. They had no choice. They were under very strict orders and many were just teenagers. These people just forced themselves to do the killing. They just wanted to save their

own lives."

Yem too wanted to put the past behind him. His eye is on the future and he's energized by the conviction that education is the key to improving the lives of his people - the insurance that the horrific failures of the past would never be repeated.

The trip back to Siem Reap was hilarious. Of course I had no idea what was so funny. I couldn't understand a word. But the laughter was contagious and I was absorbed in my companion's spirit of friendship and community. Their exuberance quashed my preconceptions.

Yem was at the wheel as we bounced over the red dirt road. The speeding SUV pierced the moonless night like a beacon of light - an apt metaphor, I think, for this dedicated staff and the impact of their selfless work.



