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Introduction
A World Turned Upside Down

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"Also Georgiana Wife of the Above," said young Pip in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, reading from his father's tombstone. He knew his parents only from their gravesite. "*Also Georgiana*. That's my mother," he explained to the convict Magwitch. Asked about his father, Pip replied, "Him too; late of this parish." Then, to Pip's astonishment, the convict grabbed him and turned him upside down, then back again, until "the church came to itself—for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me, and I saw the steeple under my feet." Once again, he "gave me the most tremendous dip and roll, so that the church jumped over its own weather-cock."[1]

Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields provides a child's-eye view of a different, harsher world, one in which Cambodia's children were turned upside down. From 1975 to 1979 the Khmer Rouge regime not only upended the entire Buddhist religion but also mounted history's fiercest ever attack on family life. In the prerevolutionary Khmer language, the word *kruosaa* meant family. But under the Khmer Rouge it came to mean spouse. As the Khmer Rouge redefined the family, they simply excluded children. Now children belonged not to their parents but to Angkar, the Khmer Rouge's ruling organization. Like Pip, Cambodian children were orphaned, deprived of real knowledge of their natural parents, and

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constantly told how lucky they were to be adopted by their new family.

Almost all Cambodian families were broken up. Yet while Angka suppressed family life, Cambodia became a family dictatorship. Its rulers now consisted of the families of Prime Minister Pol Pot and his brother-in-law, Deputy Prime Minister Ieng Sary (they had married the Khieu sisters). The family network of Mok, Angka's military chief of staff–including his siblings, children, and in-laws–ruled the regime's Southwest Zone heartland and, increasingly, other parts of the country as well.

Most families in Cambodia saw their children taken away and sent to live in barracks or at distant worksites. Especially in the Southwest Zone, people were placed into new social categories on the basis of the recent geographical origin or the assumed political inclinations of their relatives. But this did not mean that extended or even nuclear families could live together, since family "influence"–pernicious word for love–threatened the regime.

As early as 1972, three years before their victory over the Lon Nol regime, the Khmer Rouge in the southwest cast their family ideology into songs that they taught the people living under their control. One, about Khmer Rouge soldiers, went as follows:

> You depend on your grandparents,
> But they are far away.
> You depend on your mother,
> But your mother is at home.
> You depend on your elder sister,
> But she has married a [Lon Nol] soldier . . .
> You depend on the rich people,
> But the rich people oppress the poor people.[2]

The last two lines reveal that the Khmer Rouge placed family relationships in the same category as class relationships. All were portrayed as unreliable if not antagonistic, entanglements to be severed.

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applicants completed an eleven-page biographical form. Most of this form was taken up by no fewer than thirty-two questions seeking information about the applicant's family members. There were ten questions concerning the applicant's spouse, four about his or her children, seven on the applicant's parents, six on the parents-in-law, and five on the applicant's siblings.[6] Informing on one's family was required behavior in the Khmer Rouge movement.

In the section of the form devoted to parents, applicants were asked, "Do your parents have influence and power of a political, economic, material, or sentimental nature, or any kind of interaction with you? Do you have any influence or power over your parents?" In the section entitled "On Natural Children," the security forces required prospective security police and prison warders to state the sex and age of their children, how many of them were married and working, the nature of their occupations and their class membership, whether they had joined a political organization, whether they had joined the revolution, and the nature of their attitude or behavior toward the revolution.

Applicants were asked for their revolutionary views on "loving, hating, and educating children." The final question was, "Do your children have influence, power, or interaction of any kind with you?"

In this book, surviving victims hit back. They were children then. They are grown now, with memories.

Those memories include nightmares. Darkness was a constant fear, of course. But for children under the Khmer Rouge, even sleeping became one of the most terrifying aspects of life. Roeun Sam recalls, "When the night came I always worried. I stayed up even when they told us to go to sleep. Angka walked around with a flashlight at night to see who was asleep and who wasn't. I was afraid that maybe next time it will be me. I will die before I see the sun rise. I had little rest and then I heard the whistle and my head inside me sighed, 'Oh, I am alive.' I got up and got in line."

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A Khmer Rouge soldier ordered children, "Go to sleep like Death." Waking up was little better. As Ouk Villa tells it, "Early in the morning all children had to get up or they were kicked and pulled by the unit leaders." The Khmer Rouge, which saw children as oppressed by their parents, expected them to behave as adults. In the words of Hong A. Chork, "My childhood was lost during those years." The Khmer Rouge allowed no time for growing up.

Another nightmare that haunted the children evacuated from the cities of Cambodia was the jungle—"the most unsafe and dangerous place in the country." The child's mind of Khuon Kiv focused on "poisonous insects, tigers, elephants, and dangerous snakes." The Khmer Rouge, for their part, emphasized the resources and productivity of the countryside. But the "rural areas which we never even knew existed," as Ouk Villa puts it, became a world of insecurities and fear for these youngsters. They were constantly off balance. Gen L. Lee recalls, "There were times as I would smack a handful of rice plants against the side of my foot I would fall forward into the thick brown water. My body was light and I was unable to balance myself against the heavy mud. . . . When it rained, my body shivered like a tiny chick, yearning for its mother's protection and warmth. My body was reduced to bones and skin, a thin frame that could easily fall when caught in the wind."

The authors of this book are mostly from Cambodia's towns. Before the revolution, urban life was more prosperous than in the countryside. "It was good growing up. . . . The Cambodia I knew as a child was a beautiful place," says Youkimny Chan. "My life was sheltered and well provided for," adds Gen Lee. Under the Khmer Rouge, by contrast, "it was difficult to work over ten hours a day on an empty stomach. I was not good at catching field rats and frogs. . . . Building a dam and trenches was not suited for someone under four feet."

But the stories of peasant children are often equally hor-

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rific. In March 1979, I came across two Cambodian peasant boys, aged thirteen and fourteen, who were working as unpaid servants for an official in Thailand. The boys had just escaped from the defeated Khmer Rouge army. One of them, Sat, when asked what had happened in his village in 1975 and 1976, replied, "They were killing people every day." In 1977 "all children no longer breastfeeding were taken from their parents and cared for permanently by female members of the Khmer Rouge. The reason given was to enable the mothers to work more effectively." Many of the boys Sat knew missed their parents badly. "Some of them cried with grief at times; the Khmer Rouge would beat them with sticks until they stopped crying." At the age of eleven, Sat marched off with one hundred boys to do forced labor, building a road through a jungle on the Thai border. The work was "so exhausting that some of the boys fell down unconscious at the worksite." By the time of his flight to Thailand, Sat had not seen his family for two years and did not even know whether they were alive or how to look for his home village. Sat said that when he became an adult, he wanted to "Live with other people."[8]

It is not possible to accurately assess the death toll in these children's families. Most of authors of this book lost parents, brothers, and sisters. Those whose nuclear families survived lost aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. In all, about 1.7 million Cambodians died. Six million survivors saw their families decimated. And scattered. Susie Hem writes, "My mom was separated from my father. Every two months she would sneak out to meet him so they could talk about running away from this place and finding another place with more food and water."

The Khmer Rouge upended the Cambodian world in various ways. Children had to work like adults. Adults, given instructions like children, were treated like animals. Animals received better rations than workers. Adults became so alienated from the regime that young children became the only

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hope for the Khmer Rouge revolution to reproduce itself. Children were employed as militia, to spy on their families, and as soldiers and executioners. The Khmer Rouge hoped to use children as the basis of a new society without memory. As this books shows, that hope was fruitless. Children remained attached to their families and their memories. And in the end, the world righted itself, like the church steeple in *Great Expectations.*

Based on his readings of his parent's tombstone, Pip saw the reference to his father as "the Above" to be a sign of his lofty status. "And if any one of my deceased relations had been referred to as 'Below' I have no doubt I should have formed the worst opinions of that member of the family."[9] Death's forced separation of Cambodian children from their families had a similar impact on them. Wooden Khmer Rouge propaganda, as in the songs Angka taught them, did not diminish children's love or respect for their parents. Arn Yan, for instance, is straightforward: "I survived the Khmer Rouge largely because my mother really cared about me."

After the Vietnamese overthrow of the Pol Pot regime, a unique social revolution took place in Cambodia. Buddhism rapidly "came to itself" as the high point of village life again. And orphans all over the country immediately began putting back together their shattered families and lives. They succeeded, as this book demonstrates.

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