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Op-Ed Contributor

## Last Breakfast in Cambodia

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CAMBODIANS and other Theravada Buddhists celebrate their New Year in mid-April. They were not always able to do so. Under Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese rule, those ancient traditions were forbidden, impossible. But now Cambodia is free again and the festivities are in the open. As I wander the country of my youth, I see people spending the long holiday praying at temples and visiting relatives.

And I remember. My family used to hold a reunion on April 13 to mark both the New Year and my mother's birthday. In 1975, we had no idea that it would be our last. We were all apprehensive about the future, and my mother was distraught because I had missed the American evacuation.

The day before, an officer of the United States Agency for International Development had told me that I had to be at the embassy within an hour if I wanted to be airlifted out of Cambodia. (I was a manager for the American relief agency CARE and had been selected for the evacuation.) Instead, I went to a meeting to find a way to help 3,000 families stranded in an isolated province.

"Maybe I can make the meeting and get to the embassy in time," I thought.

But as I returned to Phnom Penh, the traffic became heavily congested. Thousands of people on ox carts and overloaded bicycles were making their way to the capital to seek shelter and safety. When I finally reached the American Embassy and gave my name to the security officer, he looked puzzled.

"They are not coming back — they are gone!" The guard shouted his answer to emphasize the hard truth. And he added: "The war is over. We will have peace!"

Speechless, I went to the riverbank and looked at the horizon to see if I could spot the helicopters. The sky was blue and cloudless. I saw nothing. Years later, I learned that I had been looking in the wrong direction. The helicopters had flown westward toward the Gulf of Thailand. And I was looking east.

I was 30 minutes late. My life was going to change forever.

Everyone in the city was in a very somber mood. We prayed that our beloved country would return to the peaceful and stable life of the 1960s. What would happen to us now that the United States had closed its embassy? Two days earlier, President Gerald Ford had announced: "The situation in

South Vietnam and Cambodia has reached a critical phase requiring immediate and positive decisions by this government. The options before us are few, and the time is very short.”

Five days later, on April 17, I stopped at a street-side restaurant to have a bowl of Phnom Penh noodles. A waiter took my order in Khmer and shouted in Cantonese loudly enough to be heard all the way to the kitchen: “One bowl of Kuyteiv Phnom Penh, no MSG, no fat, blanched bean sprouts, hot tea for the skinny guy with glasses, white shirt, dark pants, table 13!” A different waiter brought my noodles in less than three minutes. Not once had they got the order wrong. It was going to be my last proper breakfast in Cambodia.

I had read gruesome descriptions of the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge against enemies of their revolution: babies thrown into the air and caught with a bayonet, children smashed into trees, villagers having their throats cut with the thorns of palm branches, merchants clubbed to death with the back of a hoe. I did not believe them.

The street was lined with city residents, a few still wearing the kramas and sarongs they had slept in. One was brushing his teeth. But all were looking north, waiting for something. They looked fearful.

I spent all day in a temporary emergency room in the Hotel Le Royal doing what I could to help. I came out for fresh air and saw the Khmer Rouge being welcomed. People seemed genuinely happy that the war had ended.

Later that day, the first day of “peace,” I and 15 of my family members left our home after the Khmer Rouge had ordered all cities immediately emptied, and walked to Pochentong, the village where my siblings and I were born. Our house was occupied by strangers, so we went to the temple. The monks were already gone and there were bodies lying around. Mother was sobbing. The women and girls in our family were choking back tears. The boys and men were all silent.

Shortly thereafter, I was separated from my family by the Khmer Rouge. After a year in slave labor camps, where I survived two death sentences, I escaped to Thailand. Following a few months in a Thai jail, in a Buddhist temple and in a refugee camp, I arrived in Wallingford, Conn., with \$2 in my pocket. I later learned I was the only survivor in my close family. The Khmer Rouge had killed everyone else.

Cambodia today is not unlike the Cambodia of my youth — there is deep poverty and enormous wealth, side-by-side. There is unrest beneath the surface, the unrest that helped to make the horrors of the last century possible. And so, as I walk from one memory-filled place to another, I pray for a new year in which Cambodia’s leaders will find a way to bring about peace and stability. And, of course, I pray for my family.

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