

# People

## **UP FRONT: ESCAPE FROM THE INFERNO**

A refugee survives the Cambodian horror to become a Presidential aide; Jack Friedman, Tom Nugent in Washington  
03-27-1989

One night in 1981, when he was still a relative newcomer to America, Cambodian refugee Sichan Siv was walking down Wall Street in lower Manhattan when a man stepped from the shadows, jammed a pistol in his ribs and yelled, "Give me your wallet!" "So I did," says Siv with a smile, pushing away from his big desk in the Old Executive Office Building. "No big thing. A couple credit cards, about a hundred dollars in cash." After all, what was a demand for his wallet -- even an armed demand -- compared to the horrors Siv had already lived through? Siv's laughter fills the spacious office. "Piece of cake," he says.

For Sichan Siv, the American Dream is an epic -- a tale that began in the dehumanizing terror of Cambodia's killing fields and has brought him now, 14 years later, to a position that would once have been beyond his imagining. Along the way, Siv lost nearly all his family, was brutally pressed into slave labor and crawled dazed and bleeding through the jungle to freedom. He began his life in America picking apples in a Connecticut orchard.

And now he finds himself in Washington, D.C., just across from the White House. A lanky man with jet-black hair and intense brown eyes, Siv, 41, is the first Asian refugee to become a ranking presidential assistant. In the six weeks since he joined the Bush Administration as Deputy Assistant for Public Liaison, Siv has been meeting with a broad range of interest groups, relaying their concerns upward and explaining to them the President's policies. His is now a world of disarming civility, yet in his mind's eye he still sees the inferno -- the outpouring of violence and irrational cruelty that engulfed his family and the land of his birth.

Phnom Penh, the riverside capital of Cambodia, was once one of the loveliest cities in the Far East. But by April 1975, its tree-lined boulevards had become choked with panicked refugees fleeing the carnage in the countryside however they could. After years of war, the Communist Khmer Rouge were closing in. In the city, 27-year-old Sichan Siv, an educated man whose late father had been a provincial police chief, was working for CARE, the U.S. relief agency. When the American evacuation began, Siv was alerted to be at the U.S. Embassy on April 12 to catch a departing helicopter.

So he intended. But wanting to leave with "a clear conscience," he drove that morning to meet with a regional governor about delivering more rice and medical supplies to the refugees, who desperately needed them. He missed the last chopper out by only 30 minutes.

"I felt a little bit sorry," Siv recalls, "but I thought, 'No, nothing is going to happen. The Khmer Rouge are Cambodians. We will talk to each other. We speak the same language.' "

In addition, Siv was reluctant to leave his 63-year-old mother, Chea Aun, who had raised him, his brother and two sisters after their father died when Sichan was 9. "When I finally caught up with her the next day," Siv recalls, "she was very angry at me. She said, 'Why didn't you leave?' I said, 'How could I? I cannot leave without you.' And she said, 'I am very old. I can die at any time. But you can live! You should have gone.' "

It was too late. In five days the Khmer Rouge came swaggering into Phnom Penh in no mood to talk. At gunpoint they ordered the populace to march into the countryside for relocation. Sichan, his mother, his older brother and sister and their families set out for Siv's father's native village of Tonle Bati. With 3 million people leaving the city over bomb-cratered dirt roads, the five-mile hike took 10 days. Once he and his family arrived, they were put to hard labor in the fields.

Knowing the Khmer Rouge despised the literate classes, Sichan had thrown away his eyeglasses ("a death sentence," he says) before the fall of Phnom Penh. Then, masquerading as a cab driver, he stole a bicycle and prepared to make a desperate race for the Thai border several hundred miles northwest. As his sister wept and prayed for his safety, he bade Chea Aun a heart-wrenching adieu.

"My mother gave me her wedding ring and a few gold necklaces that had belonged to my grandfather," says Siv. "She held my hand tightly and whispered that all the merits she had earned in her practice of Buddhism would protect me."

It had been Chea Aun's faith that had sustained the family after her husband, Siv Chham, died in 1957. Before that the family's life had been idyllic. Afterward, Sichan and his brother, Sichhun, toted water and firewood for their mother while the girls helped in the house. Though reduced in means, Chea Aun cooked not only for her family but, on holidays, for the entire village. Sichan - whose name means "Beautiful Moon" in Khmer -- often stood by her side as she stirred her lemongrass soup. "She always said that happiness is something we cannot keep unless we give it away," he says. "She would say, 'Remember, Sichan. Whatever happens, never give up hope.'"

At the age of 15, Sichan was admitted to an exclusive high school in Phnom Penh. After graduating in 1968, he became a flight attendant for Royal Air Cambodge, where he improved his English. But by 1970 tourism was a casualty of the widening war in Southeast Asia, and Sichan went to college in Phnom Penh, studied law briefly after graduation and became an English teacher. In 1974 he went to work for CARE.

Looking back, Siv still struggles to comprehend the Cambodian holocaust. Sometimes he is fatalistic. "For a hundred years there was a prophecy," he explains, "that Cambodia would go through a period of turmoil so violent that the bloodbath would have to reach the elephant's belly before peace could return."

Setting out on his bicycle in May 1975, carrying a pouch of rice and fish paste, Siv saw daily evidence of that bloodbath. "I never saw any public executions," he says. "The Khmer Rouge

didn't work that way. People simply disappeared, and then one day you'd see their decomposing bodies. And I think that actually created more fear than if you'd seen the killing with your own eyes."

Every day more bodies littered the fields. Under the Khmer Rouge, perhaps as many as 3 million Cambodians died. Forcing a quaintly capitalistic society to transform itself overnight into a Marxist state, the Khmer Rouge took the position, Siv says, "that if you have some rotten fruit in the basket, you don't just pick them out, you turn the basket upside down. It was insane, is all I can tell you."

For three weeks, Siv slept in the bushes and brazenly flashed phony passes under the noses of the largely young, illiterate Khmer soldiers who stopped him. In June his luck ran out. Peasants in a village 15 miles from the Thai border reported him, and he was arrested. Now he truly entered the heart of darkness.

Imprisoned in a succession of slave-labor camps, Siv toiled 18 hours a day, digging ditches, hoeing weeds, fixing roads. Then he would stagger back to the huts, gag down a bowl of rancid soup and fall into a fitful sleep. "I learned quickly how to survive," he says. "I didn't know anything, I didn't speak of anything. I stopped worrying about the murders. I didn't even think about them. There was no time to think."

Yet some things could not be forgotten. Always he would hear his mother's words: "Remember, Sichan. Whatever happens, never give up hope."

Stubbornly ("I was too tired to be scared," he says), Sichan vowed he would still escape to Thailand. But he had no idea how to proceed. Then in February, 1976, while working on a logging crew, he heard a guard say that the crew would leave the border area the next day. Suddenly there was no time for planning.

The merits Sichan's mother had accrued in her Buddhism must have been numerous indeed, for after overhearing the first guard, her son discovered that there would be only one guard on the logging truck that day instead of the usual two. Sitting in the cab with the driver, who was also a prisoner, the guard was forced to watch Sichan -- riding atop a load of teak in the back -- in the truck's sideview mirror. Stealthily Sichan moved to the back of the truck as it jounced over a jungle road back to the camp.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. In his mind he saw his mother bending over her soup. He heard her voice: "Never give up hope!" And he jumped.

Suddenly, to his horror, he found his shirt snagged on a jagged spike of teak. Unable to tear himself free, he was dragged down the road by the truck. Red dust choked his lungs. He knew he was as good as dead. If being dragged and smashed against the logs didn't kill him, the guard would.

Then the truck hit a huge pothole, and Sichan was hurled into the air. He landed hard in the road, dazed and hurt but able to pick himself up and scramble into the jungle. Groping through thick

bamboo and razor-sharp saw grass, he followed the setting sun. He staggered on for two days, once tumbling into a booby trap filled with deadly punji sticks that left his knee permanently scarred. Then, on the third day, he crossed a banana field and saw food cans labeled in Thai. He saw a sneaker print in the dirt, and came to a road where a man and a woman passed by on a motorcycle. He knew there were no sneakers in Cambodia -- Western clothing was banned -- and that under Khmer Rouge law the sexes were not permitted to ride together. Finally, he saw a truck rumble by loaded with people in brightly colored clothes, not Khmer black. Siv clapped his hands in joy. "This is Thailand," he thought. "Nobody in Cambodia wears colorful clothes."

He was right, though his joy was premature. Thai officials arrested him at once for illegal entry. Fortunately, his mother's merits had not been exhausted. Ten days later, a friend in Bangkok came to bail him out. Siv was teaching English in a refugee camp when his former employers at CARE, told by the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok that he was alive, petitioned the State Department to let him come to America.

Sichan had one more thing to do before he left Thailand. Fulfilling a promise he had made himself back in Cambodia, he shaved his head, donned a saffron robe and was ordained as a Buddhist monk, dedicating his prayers to his mother.

On June 4, 1976, flying from New York to his new home in Wallingford, Conn., where he was being sponsored by former Peace Corps officer Bob Charles, Siv looked out the window and saw "a beautiful country -- lots of swimming pools!" To Charles, Siv looked close to exhaustion. "My initial impression was that he was ill with malaria," he says. "He was extraordinarily tired and sick, but he had amazing endurance and a sense of humor and these things helped a lot." During the next few months, Siv picked apples at a nearby orchard and learned to be a short-order cook at a local Friendly's. "Here I was, a Cambodian refugee who had never seen a hamburger in his life," Siv says, laughing, "and suddenly I'm hearing medium, medium-rare, hold the lettuce, hold the tomato. I was very confused."

Yet in only a matter of months, the new arrival was chafing. "I said to myself, 'This is not how I want to spend the rest of my life,'" he says. Moving to Manhattan, he became a cab driver, was robbed several times and eventually got a job counseling refugees from various countries for a Lutheran organization. In 1979 he wrote impassioned letters to deans at several U.S. universities describing his education and personal history as well as his goal of pursuing a career in international relations. One day after inviting him in for an interview, Columbia University offered him a full graduate scholarship. In 16 months he earned a master's degree in international affairs, and in December 1982 he became a U.S. citizen.

Meanwhile, Siv had met Martha Pattillo, a native Texan who had once worked for the United Nations in Bangkok. "I happened to invite him to my place ((in Manhattan)) to have a cup of tea," says Martha, who now runs a New York management-consulting service, "and he arrived with the biggest bouquet of flowers I'd ever seen." She and Siv were married in her hometown of Pampa on Christmas Eve 1983. "A Buddhist married to a Presbyterian," observes Siv cheerfully. "That's interesting!"

But there has been sorrow, too, a visitation from the past in Siv's new life. Back in 1980, he flew to San Francisco to meet his younger sister, Samnang, who was arriving from Thailand. Her letters had informed him that 15 relatives, including their mother, Chea Aun, had perished. He didn't learn how until Samnang, shaking with grief as she held her brother, told him. "My mother went to the Khmer Rouge," says Siv, "and said, 'Why do you leave me alive? You have killed my daughter and my son already. Why don't you kill me as well?'" So they did."

He is silent for a moment. "I was terribly angry at first," he says. "But then it finally passed. And I began to tell myself: 'At least she didn't suffer too much.'"

With his degree, Siv went to work for the United Nations and later the Institute of International Education in New York. That's where he was last Jan. 16 when David Demarest, now a presidential assistant, called to ask if he would come to Washington for an interview. Siv had worked hard for the Bush campaign in New York and was friendly with a Bush aide who, impressed with Siv's knowledge and personality, recommended him to Demarest. Soon after his interview, Siv was offered the \$65,000-a-year job he now holds.

The Administration feels fortunate to have him. "He's already made quite an impact on the White House in the short time he's been here," says Bobbie Kilberg, another deputy assistant. "You can trust him with your life. He tells you what he really thinks, and often in politics that's not what happens."

Gazing into his fireplace, Siv thinks again of his mother. "I know that she must be very proud at this moment to see her youngest son being able to help others," he says. "If I had one obsession it was to live in freedom and democracy."

He remembers his first Fourth of July in America, in a small Vermont town during the Bicentennial. There were bands, not soldiers or refugees, marching in the streets; fireworks, not mortars, lighting up the sky. "I was extremely impressed," Siv recalls. "I said to myself, 'This is my country now.'"

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