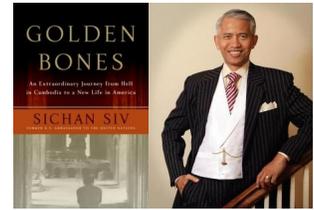


Sichan Siv to Share Journey from Cambodia to the U.S.



By Leah DuMouchel

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There are a nearly limitless number of things to think about in former U.N. ambassador **Sichan Siv**'s memoir "[Golden Bones: An Extraordinary Journey from Hell in Cambodia to a New Life in America](#)" (HarperCollins, 2008): a couple of millennia of southeast Asian history, the basics of Buddhism, world politics throughout the second half of the 20th century, the limits of human endurance, the myriad ways of being reborn.

But what I found wafting most often into my mind after I'd put it down were the old Khmer proverbs. "At home different mothers, but only one mother in the jungle" offers a whole new take on the teaching profession. "If you find yourself in the mouth of a tiger, play with his teeth!" is straight-talking good advice with a little comic relief, but I'm not quite sure what "Animals do not run into the mouth of a sleeping lion" is trying to get at. And I could probably spend days ruminating on "It's better to lose a father than a mother; it's better to have a shipwreck than a fire" without deriving any of the comfort that it seems to be meant to offer.

They give the impression of being trivial, these strings of words fused together over centuries of association and worn smooth around the edges by all the handling. But as Siv threads his way through the full version of the story he's [coming to the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library](#) to share, we hear his mother's words echo like a drumbeat through it: "No matter what happens, never give up hope." She says it when he gets laid off from his much-coveted airline job and again as he sets off for a teaching college in Singapore. She says it when she gives him her blessing to escape from the labor camp their family has been forced into by the [unspeakably violent Khmer Rouge regime](#), repeating it silently with her eyes as he straps a bag of rice and fish to his bike and pedals away from everyone he loves as nonchalantly as possible. When the words ring in his ears as he leaps from the top of a moving log-hauling truck and rolls into the jungle for cover from "the deadly snout of the AK-47" in the lap of the truck's passenger, it's clear that this particular platitude is shaping up to hold the power of life and death.

Reading this memoir feels a little like standing on shifting ground. On the one hand, a bare litany of facts — heck, the title alone — presents a story at the absolute apex of human drama, the sort that only happens to "someone else." Despotically genocidal regimes like Pol Pot's are blessedly rare, and survivors are unfortunately much rarer; it's estimated that the Khmer Rouge's bloodbath between 1975 and 1979 killed between a quarter and a third of Cambodia's 7.3 million people. To spend a year on the run, cross an ocean, arrive at the home of strangers with \$2 in your pocket and steadily work your way from apple picking in Massachusetts onto the staff of two American presidents is stretching the boundaries of belief a bit. I mean really — do *you* know anyone who could manage that? Me neither.

On the other hand, Siv tells this remarkable story in his gentle voice, sometimes dipping into sudden humor and always giving us expansive, thoughtful connections between one event and the next. Sure, it seems like an action hero stunt to leap off the top of a pile of moving logs, unless you'd been brutally enslaved and saw a crack through which you could slip. Sure, it seems unrealistically ambitious to set up English-language classes at your refugee camp after a year of near-starvation on the run, unless the uncertainty of your future is so pressing that the opportunity to keep busy is worth its weight in gold. Sure, it seems incongruous to describe all New Yorkers as "friendly" immediately before launching

into a tale about how two of them extracted your life savings from your bank account, unless you've personally met people so wretched that these pickpockets are eligible for canonization by comparison. Maybe, you think suddenly, "There but for the grace of God go I."

Although Siv has been recounting this story personally and professionally pretty much since he arrived in America on June 4, 1976, he tells us in the preface that it took three decades to commit it to a book. "I did not want to revisit a painful past. I was looking forward to a new life," he said, but eventually he became convinced that the benefits of sharing his story widely outweighed his discomfort.

Were there, I asked him by phone recently, any unexpected pleasures in writing this book? "When I put pen to paper, the words just came out, very much like when you turn on a faucet," he answered from his adopted home in Texas, where he lives with his wife, Martha. A registered Republican since practically the first minute of his citizenship, its politics suit him (can you get any further away from Communism than Texas?) and he continues to delight in riding horses just like in the French-dubbed American Westerns he watched as a kid. He went on to say that while the actual writing had given him a measure of satisfaction, what overwhelmed him was the global response to it. "I got e-mail from all over the world thanking me for sharing the story. Many Cambodians make about \$100 a month, and they came to my book signing to buy a \$22 book. And then they brought their families their children and wanted to have pictures with me! That's very heartwarming."

That the children should be brought to see Siv, to hear his voice and learn his story, is tremendously important in a country where genocide has skewed the population so that fully half of it is younger than 20 years old. "This is more than my memoir," he said firmly. "It's a history book and a human story and a history of that period of time and of Cambodia and the United States and everything in between."

Cambodia now, he says, is "stable. It is moving along from many domestic problems, like corruption and injustice. But the economy is moving along, and people have more things to eat and are better dressed." Does he feel that any justice has been served in regard to the genocide, or ever it will be? "I don't think so," came the answer, with sadness but free of rancor. The ratio between the number of persons brought to account before the law to the number slaughtered approaches zero. And he points out that "Cambodia has no death penalty, so even if these people were convicted for the crimes they committed, they will only be in jail for the rest of their lives." Still, he feels that there is peace even in the absence of justice.

"Cambodians are Buddhists — they tend to forgive and forget. They are back to normal lives; they send their kids to schools and have festivals. So there is peace in Cambodia. You can tell by the number of tourists at (the great Buddhist temple of) [Angkor Wat](#) - a million of them last year!"

The photo on the book's cover shows him as one of them, seen from the back as a solitary supplicant against the temple's imposing profile. "There is no author's face on the front of the cover — most memoirs have them, but this one doesn't. That's to encourage the reader to ask...questions: Who is that? It's me, Ambassador Siv. What is standing in front of? Angkor Wat. When was that taken? March of 1992, when (I returned to Cambodia and the villagers who heard my story) told me, 'You are a man of golden bones.' Why was that picture chosen? Because to me, it symbolized everything that is important to me: faith, family, friends and freedom."

Ambassador Sichan Siv comes to the Gerald R. Ford Library to talk about Cambodia, his escape from the Khmer Rouge and his great American story at 7:30 p.m. on Monday, March 29. Admission is free, and copies of "[Golden Bones: An Extraordinary Journey from Cambodia to a New Life in America](#)" will be available for purchase.

Leah DuMouchel is a free-lance writer who covers books for [AnnArbor.com](#).