



An American from Cambodia

"You are a Man of Golden Bones."

—Cambodian villager speaking to
U.S. Ambassador Siv, referring to the
Khmer myth of one having very good luck.

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FIRST, A DISCLAIMER.

I met Sichan Siv many years ago while reporting for the *Reader's Digest* I wrote about him, his extraordinary journey out of Cambodia, and his extraordinary journey as a new American. The subtitle of this book is dead-on. Now, as a friend and close reader, on to Sichan's always poignant and, incredibly, sometimes humorous memoir written in his own natural, eloquent hand, sans ghostwriter or workshops.

Sichan Siv escaped the communist Khmer Rouge killing fields in 1976 and made his way across the frontier jungle to a Thai refugee camp. He had fallen into a booby trap, almost impaling himself on killer punji sticks, had followed the path of the westerly sun and moon. Land mines, deadly snakes, communist outposts and camps: he made it, was jailed, released, became a Buddhist monk, with shaved head and eyebrows and saffron robe. Later he taught English to refugees, served those most in need, and withdrew inside himself.

If you've seen the movie *The Killing Fields*, you might understand. Sichan was there; his family was killed, he starved, became deathly ill at times, saw horrors not seen or fully comprehended by modern minds since the Holocaust, when the world said, "Never again!" Well, it was "again!" Hitler was reincarnated as Khmer Rouge dictator Pol Pot—more than two million executed, and half that number forever missing. "Angka wants to see you," was how death sentences were announced. "Angka" was the faceless, invisible machine that drove the maddened homicidal illiterate teenagers with their red kramas and rubber-tire sandals.

"Enemies"—the literate, those who wore glasses, or simply had started their march with nice clothes—were killed. They died kneeling, bending their necks down so pointed hoes could be driven into their brainstem. It was better to cooperate, otherwise your death would be long and painful. Madness, despair, suicides, death by sheer exhaustion and starvation. Sichan was there.

He escaped.

One fall day many years ago while dining in a nice French restaurant in Washington, D.C., I gently refused to let Sichan nudge me away from those times. He had been in the camps for a year. According to VA studies, the human mind can take, maximum, 240 days of combat before it simply shuts down. But usually, much sooner. Sichan had been in the war as a Cambodian CARE worker prior to the Khmer Rouge entering Phnom Penh, the capital city. Then came another war. I knew he was avoiding certain triggers of nightmarish memories—I understood. But, I had to know.

For example, his brother: They were in the same camp, but, because his brother had been a military officer, they had never spoken. Speaking would implicate Sichan, his mother, and then the rest. And yet, Sichan had described to me their having said goodbye. During a return in 1980 he learned that, indeed, shortly after his escape an announcement had been made to his brother that "Angka wants to see you," and he and Sichan's entire family had been led off to the jungle and were never seen again. *They had said goodbye.*

So, in that nice French restaurant, Jean-Pierre's on K Street, I'd asked him how he had done this if in fact they dared not talk. "With our eyes," Sichan had said. "We learned to talk with our eyes." And so, as an experiment I'd insisted upon, we talked for a while ourselves—using only our eyes. I felt myself catching my breath, slipping near tears. I saw horror. I realized I had to avoid "triggers" to these terrible memories of his; there were no words. What his eyes said was too powerful for a simple journalist to attempt repeating. The story I wrote about Sichan for the "old" *Reader's Digest* rated first in surveys, was published in editions throughout the world, and in all these years has always been found in some anthology or another. Currently, I notice it is in one titled *Cultures in Diversity*.

MY REASON FOR TELLING YOU THIS is that I think

Sichan today has backed sensibly away from all those horrifying "triggers." Yes, he returned to Cambodia with Martha, his beautiful all-American Texas-born wife of 25 years, and yes, he confronted his demons, as he told me recently. But I think he did so only as one might sleepwalk, holding his breath while skirting the snake pit of paralyzing memory.

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than it is about hope.

I understand.

His book, when dealing with corpses, camps, or saying goodbye to his brother and entire family, is more documented than finely written. It is almost clinical in its explanation of what happened—of what it was like inside this modern, very true Holocaust. In short, Sichan seems to hurry through the hell—and we all must understand.

Although he details the killing fields, it is less about them than it is about hope, which was his mother's—Mae's—legacy. He revels in both, in his childhood, his school learning, his Cambodian family, and his doomed mother. And he revels in American and Cambodian history. By the time you've reached the death camps, you should know why and how you got there. By the time you've gotten to America, where he went from picking apples for two dollars a bushel to U.S. ambassador to a UN body—representing us throughout the world—you will know why he repeats his mother's enduring words, and her last ones to him, to "never give up hope!"

And you will genuinely like this tall, lean, handsome man with the shy smile, who became a Republican back when it meant "anti-communist," and who now lives in San Antonio, helps out on friends' ranches, and wears a big Texas hat. Lord knows, he's earned it.

A great American story, told by a great American.