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**Sue Downie**

**Insight text guide: First They Killed My Father**

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# INTRODUCTION

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*First They Killed My Father* is a powerful first-person account of the Khmer Rouge's unprecedented reign of terror that turned Cambodia upside down culturally, politically, economically and emotionally. Loung Ung provides a unique account of a child surviving the so-called 'killing fields' period, and it is a refreshingly naïve perspective not found in history books.

The five-year-old who worries that her school skirt is too short, emerges at the end of the book mature, independent and capable far beyond her nine years. *First They Killed My Father* is not only a unique account of this period in Cambodian history, but is also a chronology of survival, a testament of endurance, and a tribute to the Khmer Rouge children who have gone on to help others.

Through her childhood eyes, Loung tells how the Khmer Rouge evacuated the cities when they came to power in April 1975 and for the next four years and eight months forced almost the entire population to live out their agrarian ideology. The events in the text illustrate the impact of the regime's practices and policies on the individual and on society.

The Ung family epitomise everything the Khmer Rouge want to destroy: Pa is a member of the Lon Nol army and speaks French, Ma is Chinese, they are of the educated middle-class, and they are urban. Ironically, in the Khmer Rouge's new world of collective living Loung and her family live in total isolation, and this five-year-old begins to understand loneliness. As the title suggests, Pa is the first to be killed, and by the time the Vietnamese oust the Khmer Rouge, Loung has lost both parents and two sisters.

Loung first presents herself as a loud, difficult, attention-seeking girl with few cares. Yet through this honest, frank memoir, Loung, as author, allows us to witness the intimate: how her values change from those of a materialistic, self-centred child to one who grows to appreciate sacrifice, her father's wisdom and her own inner strength, and to care for others.

It is not uncommon for survivors of trauma such as this to later become (in professional or voluntarily roles) translators, social workers, counsellors or refugee lawyers. After migrating to the USA in 1980, Loung Ung graduated in political science then moved to Washington DC in 1997 and joined the Campaign for a Landmine-Free World. She is now spokesperson for the campaign in the USA.

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# BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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*Growing up in a military family in Phnom Penh in the mid-1970s Loung and her siblings are relatively sheltered from the civil war that precedes the Khmer Rouge takeover, and Pa's status allows the Ung family to live comfortably. However, this relative privilege is starkly contrasted with the deprivation and hardship they face in the following years under the fanatical Communists who play out their obsessive desire to rid Cambodia of foreign influence and create a classless agrarian society.*

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## ***Khmers — Ethnic Origins***

An estimated 90 per cent of the 11.3 million population of Cambodia today are of ethnic Khmer origin, with the remainder comprising Chams, Lao, and ethnic minorities of the northeast, descendants of Chinese immigrants and more recent Vietnamese immigrants. The composition in 1975 would have been similar. Loung's mother was an ethnic Chinese who migrated to Cambodia when she was three years old.

Physically, Khmers tend to be huskier, taller, and darker than their counterparts in Vietnam, Thailand or Laos, and sometimes have curly hair and rounder eyes. They are also much darker than Vietnamese and Chinese. Loung regarded her father as pure Khmer, as depicted by the stone faces of the gods at Angkor Wat. Khmer rarely marry Vietnamese or Cham, but marriage between Khmer and Chinese is common, as was the case with Loung's parents. Note, the children are regarded as Khmer as their father is Khmer.

## ***Cambodia's Dominant Religion***

The dominant religion in Cambodia is Theravada Buddhism, with small numbers of Muslims and Christians. Loung's family are Buddhists. The official language is Khmer, which is derived from Sanskrit and Pali and belongs to the Mon-Khmer family of languages. Khmer is spoken throughout the country, although Vietnamese, Chinese and Cham groups speak their respective languages at home. French was popular among the elite during the colonial period (1860s to 1950s), English began gaining popularity from the late-1980s, and since the late-1990s both have been taught in schools.

## ***The National Flag***

The national flag has changed several times with recent changes in government, but has always featured the outline of Angkor Wat, the famous temple at the centre of the ancient Angkor complex near the northwest town of Siem Reap. Over generations, the temple, the complex and the empire have come to embody Cambodia. Most Cambodians dream of visiting Angkor. Loung recalls visiting with her father (p.89), and the photos in the novel show she returned to Angkor as an adult.

## ***Cambodia as a Nation State***

The history of Cambodia as a nation state can trace its roots to 802 AD when King Jayavarman II inaugurated the Angkor Empire which, during the next 600 years, built more than 20 temples that remain today in the Siem Reap area. At its peak the Angkor Kingdom covered what is now northern Thailand, northeast Burma (Myanmar), southern Laos and southern Vietnam. The decline of the Angkor Empire in the 15th century saw the capital move from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh, followed by four centuries of conflict with Vietnam on one side and Thailand on the other. Fearing it may be swallowed by either neighbour, Cambodia appealed to France in 1863 to become a French protectorate in Indochina. Cambodia was occupied by the Japanese from March-October 1945, and at the end of World War II France reclaimed its control over the country until granting independence in 1953.

## ***King Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge***

The two main personalities in contemporary Cambodian history are Norodom Sihanouk, who has dominated the political scene for the past 60 years, and Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot. Sihanouk was crowned king by the French in 1941, attained Cambodia's independence from France in 1953, then abdicated the throne in 1955 and appointed himself as political head of state.

It was customary in the 1940s, 50s and 60s for young middle- and upper-class Cambodians to study in France (Meng was due to leave for study in France the day before the takeover). Some of these students joined the French Communist Party. Among the most prominent were Saloth Sar (who later used the alias Pol Pot), Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan. These men returned to Phnom Penh in the 1950s and subsequently set up an underground Communist movement which Sihanouk called the *Khmers Rouges* ('rouge', which is French for 'red', is the colour used to represent

Communism). From 1961 Sihanouk's anti-left campaign harassed, humiliated and imprisoned leftist radicals and intellectuals, and eventually drove the Khmer Rouge leaders out of Phnom Penh to the jungles where they set up political bases.

In March 1970, Sihanouk was overthrown in a bloodless coup (a non-violent seizure of power) instigated by his cousin Sirik Matak and Prime Minister General Lon Nol, who was immediately recognised by the USA as the new Cambodian leader. The ousted Sihanouk established his exile in Beijing and announced he was joining the Khmer Rouge in their fight against Lon Nol and the 'US imperialist forces'. The two primary reasons for Sihanouk's apparent about-face towards the Khmer Rouge are, first, he was an opportunist and realised that to be against Lon Nol meant being with the Khmer Rouge; second, even though the Khmer Rouge had been his political opponents in the 1960s, he regarded Lon Nol and the US as the greater enemy.

Despite massive US aid to the Lon Nol military, the resistance forces gradually took control of the countryside, and on 17 April 1975, after five years of civil war, overran Phnom Penh, forcing the entire population to the countryside. At this point, Sihanouk was the Khmer Rouge's nominal figure-head leader, but when he returned to Phnom Penh he was placed under house arrest and remained thus for the remainder of the Khmer Rouge rule.

### ***Khmer Rouge's Repressive Philosophy***

Not all resistance fighters were Khmer Rouge, and not all members of the Khmer Rouge would call themselves Communists, but it was the Khmer Rouge hard-line Communists who took charge. Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Nuon Chea, Son Sen and Khieu Samphan emerged as the leaders. They set out to turn Cambodia into one giant farm. Under their rural-based economy, factories and businesses were abandoned or destroyed. With little economic or administrative experience, or bureaucratic control, the Khmer Rouge implemented their agrarian philosophy. The cities, including the capital, were deserted, the occupants driven to the countryside to take part in massive labour gangs.

Money, commerce, medicine, education, religion and private ownership were banned. Many monks were murdered and temples were turned into prisons and pigsties, and schools and hospitals into torture chambers or ammunition

stores. Often children were separated from parents; husbands from wives. Many single people were forced into mass weddings. Huge commune kitchens became the norm. Virtually all the elite, educated, professionals and businessmen were killed, including architects, artists, bankers, dancers, doctors, engineers, journalists, royals, teachers and traders. In Phnom Penh, the National Bank was blown up, and the Catholic Cathedral torn apart brick by brick such that it could not be rebuilt.

The Khmer Rouge expelled all foreigners, closed ports and airports, and sealed Cambodia's borders. Unknown to the outside world, an estimated 1.7 to 2 million people — perhaps one-fifth of the population — were killed or died as a result of torture, disease or starvation. Thousands were buried in mass graves, which later became known as 'the killing fields'. Another 400,000 fled to Vietnam and Thailand. Compared with 1975, Cambodia's professional and technical sectors were decimated — for example, only 7,000 of the 22,000 teachers remained in the country and only 45 of the 450 doctors. Of the 1600 agricultural planners, technicians and policy makers, only 200 remained, of whom only 10 were graduates. There was only one licensed veterinarian in the country.<sup>1</sup>

The life described by Loung is a microcosm that was being repeated all over Cambodia, although those living in the eastern zone, near the Vietnam border, were not as severely treated as those in the rest of the country. Amazingly, the Khmer Rouge were able to control the population and prevent rebellion by starving them — although that was due to poor crop management rather than by design — and by moving people away from their home villages to different regions. Although the Khmer Rouge soldiers were armed and the rest of the population was not, the people did not rise up against their leaders, even at the local level. Nor did they undertake sabotage or hit-and-run strikes. There was virtually no armed opposition to the Khmer Rouge.

## ***The Vietnamese Invasion***

The Khmer Rouge were not ousted by their fellow Cambodians, but by their invading neighbour. Loung describes the Vietnamese invasion without providing sufficient historical context or explanation. So why did the Vietnamese invade? The Khmer Rouge believed — as do many Cambodians — that the southern part of Vietnam still belonged to Cambodia. This Mekong

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<sup>1</sup> Mysliwiec, Eva, *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea*, Oxfam, Oxford., 1988, pp.10, 25, 40, 42.

Delta area — known to Cambodians as *Kampuchea Krom* — once formed part of the mighty Angkor Empire. The Khmer Rouge wanted to reclaim Kampuchea Krom, so began attacking villages along Vietnam's southwest border, beginning in late 1975 and with greater intensity from early 1977. These attacks forced almost half a million Vietnamese to abandon their homes and about 100,000 hectares of farmland.<sup>2</sup>

As a counter measure, Vietnam sent troops into Cambodia's southeast provinces, then launched a full scale retaliation on 25 December 1978. The Vietnamese troops — accompanied by freshly retrained and equipped Cambodians who had fled to Vietnam — moved fast, and liberated Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979. Three days later they established the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Within a week they swept right across the country and reached Cambodia's western border, forcing most of the remaining Khmer Rouge to seek sanctuary in Thailand.

From January 1979, the three key players in Cambodian politics were: Vietnam, which continued occupying and de facto administering the country; Thailand, which accepted refugees and provided sanctuary and support to the Khmer Rouge and other military groups and civilians fleeing from the Vietnamese; and the new Cambodian regime, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).<sup>3</sup>

### ***The People's Republic of Kampuchea***

The PRK was headed by former Khmer Rouge officers who had fled to Vietnam, including Heng Samrin who became President, Chea Sim, the Interior Minister and Hun Sen, the Foreign Minister. In one sense the PRK regime was a relief for those who survived the Khmer Rouge, and this is reflected in Loung's comments. However, deprivation, poverty and war continued, although with far less severity.

### ***Resistance Groups in Cambodia***

Cambodians who had fled to Thailand, with the Khmer Rouge or in front of the advancing Vietnamese troops, eventually ended up in refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border. They formed several resistance groups, which eventually distilled down to three: the Khmer Rouge, those led by

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<sup>2</sup> Mysliwicz, p.9.

<sup>3</sup> After Sihanouk was ousted in 1970 the country was renamed the Khmer Republic, and four years later renamed Democratic Kampuchea by the Khmer Rouge.

Sihanouk, and a third group led by Sihanouk's one-time Prime Minister Son Sann. Although ideologically opposed to the Khmer Rouge, these latter two non-Communist factions fought with the Khmer Rouge, militarily and politically, against their common enemies, the Vietnamese and the PRK troops.

### ***Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea***

Under pressure from the West and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), these two exiled non-Communist groups agreed in 1982 to form an alliance with the Khmer Rouge, known as the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK). The CGDK, based in Thailand and headed by Sihanouk, held Cambodia's seat at the UN General Assembly.

Fighting between the Vietnamese-backed PRK and the CGDK (Khmer Rouge and non-Communist) partners continued until 1991 when the international community brokered a peace settlement that culminated in the four factions signing the Paris Peace Agreement and hence the establishment of the United Nations' largest peace-keeping mission.

### ***Civil Wars***

Loung talks of 'the war', however, the Khmer Rouge period is not generally regarded as a war, but rather a regime so repressive that virtually no one could oppose it with arms (although a small band of men in the far northwest of what is now Banteay Meanchey Province did briefly fight against Khmer Rouge soldiers). The two civil wars were in the periods before the Khmer Rouge controlled the country, when the resistance forces fought the US-backed Lon Nol government (1970-75), and after, when the remnants of the Khmer Rouge joined with the non-Communist forces to fight the Vietnamese and the PRK (1979-91).