

ALJAZEERA
MAGAZINE

Natural Born Stateless

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For four years, from 1975 to 1979, Cambodia was ruled by the Khmer Rouge. During that time, 1.7 million Cambodians died [Heather Roy]

FAMILIES OF STRANGERS

Almost 35 years after Cambodia's Khmer Rouge fell, the events that took place under its rule continue to separate children from their parents.



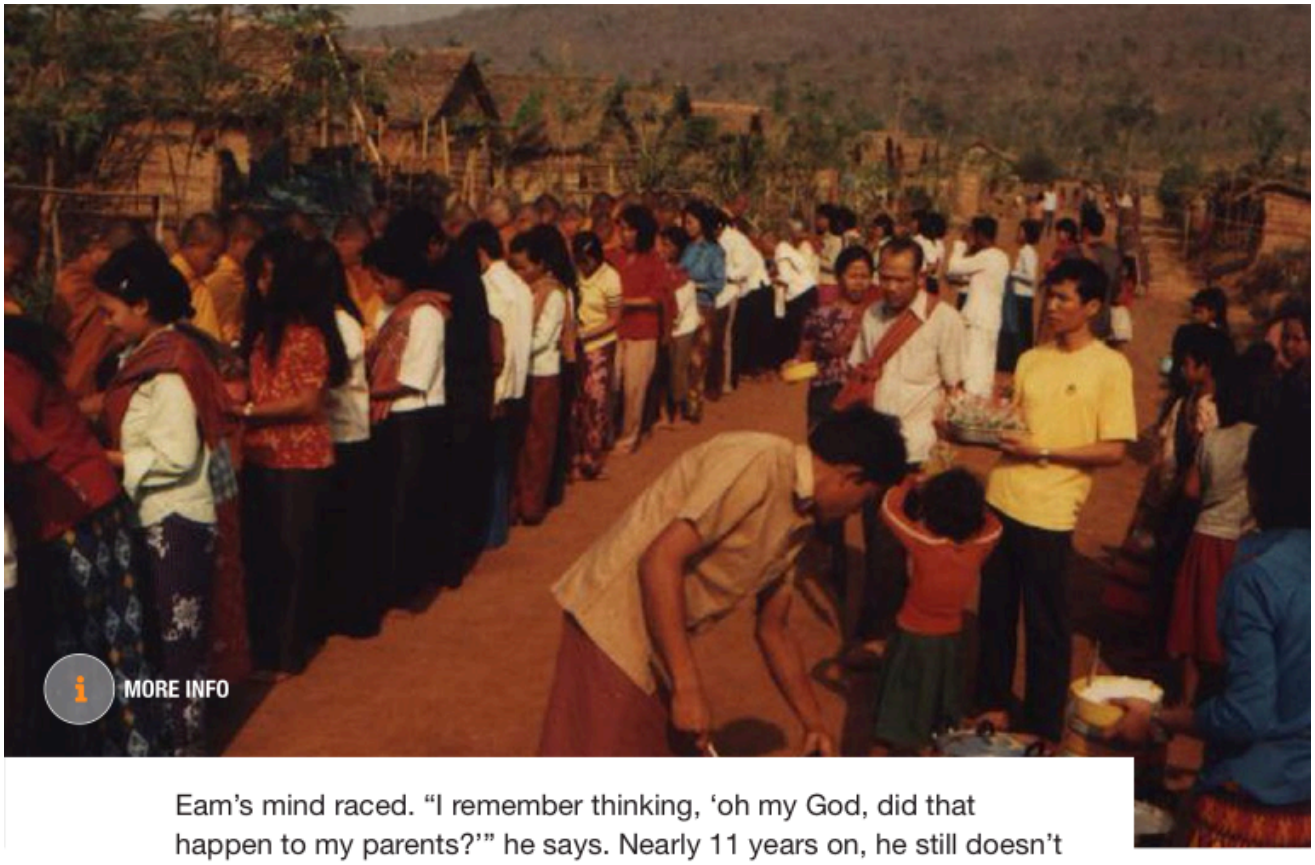
Heather Roy

PLAY AUDIO
INTERVIEWS

Bones don't stay buried for long at Choeung Ek. The rain won't let them. Ivory-coloured flecks embedded in tightly packed mud masquerade as rocks. A stupa filled with the skulls of more than 5,000 Cambodians towers in a clearing surrounded by excavated mass graves. Birds chirp and butterflies float over blades of grass rising from once bloodied pits. It is an eerie, tranquil place. No one expects to walk on the dead while gazing at the pristine, stone memorial. But bones are always underfoot – waiting for the next rainy season to drive them closer to the surface. Teeth lay scattered across a fenced-off section of path, safe from the trampling feet of tourists. These are the never-ending shards of Cambodia's past – a constant reminder that more than 1.7 million people died in fields just like this one.

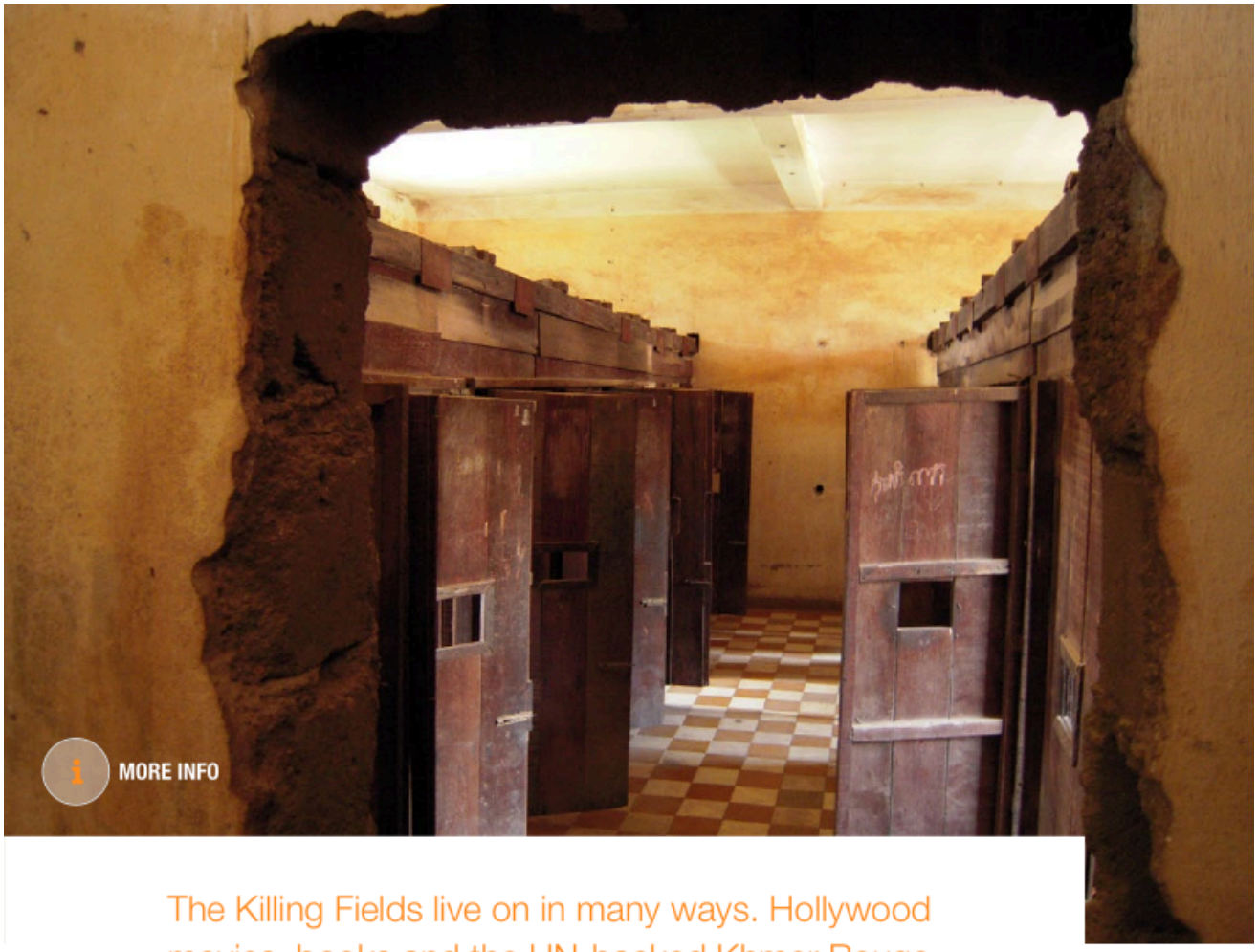
Sambo Eam remembers when he first learned of Cambodia's genocide. A grade 12 history teacher challenged him to complete a project on his heritage. He was around 17 or 18 at the time. "I didn't know it was a genocide. I had no idea," he says.

Born in a Thai refugee camp to parents who had escaped the Khmer Rouge regime, and raised in British Columbia, Canada, Eam couldn't have been further from Choeung Ek's rising bones. But his research unearthed some disturbing discoveries. And then, while talking with a friend's father, he heard something he says he will never forget. The man claimed he was repeatedly electrocuted and left to hang by Khmer Rouge soldiers.



Eam's mind raced. "I remember thinking, 'oh my God, did that happen to my parents?'" he says. Nearly 11 years on, he still doesn't have an answer.

Between 1965 and 1973, the United States dropped approximately three million tonnes of bombs on Cambodia in an attempt to destroy the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army. These bombings drove the Vietnamese Communists into contact with a small group of Cambodian guerrillas known as the Khmer Rouge. Today, some schools of thought argue that it was its ties with the Vietnamese, along with widespread anger at the bombings, that inspired more Cambodians to join the ranks of the Khmer Rouge and which, ultimately, empowered it to take over the country. Once in power, the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), or the Khmer Rouge, attempted to create an agrarian utopia. In its four years of rule, from 1975 to 1979, urban centres were evacuated and suspected traitors tortured and killed. Cambodia started over; 1975 became 'year zero'.



The Killing Fields live on in many ways. Hollywood movies, books and the UN-backed Khmer Rouge Tribunal that is currently prosecuting top officials, like the rain at Choeung Ek, uncover the horrors of the regime and broadcast them to the world. They cause people like Eam to question their own family history and to feel the sort of uncertainty that elicits a different kind of pain.

This is a story about two Cambodian refugees in Canada, their suffering and the genocide at the root of it all. It is a story of how the Killing Fields live on through people.

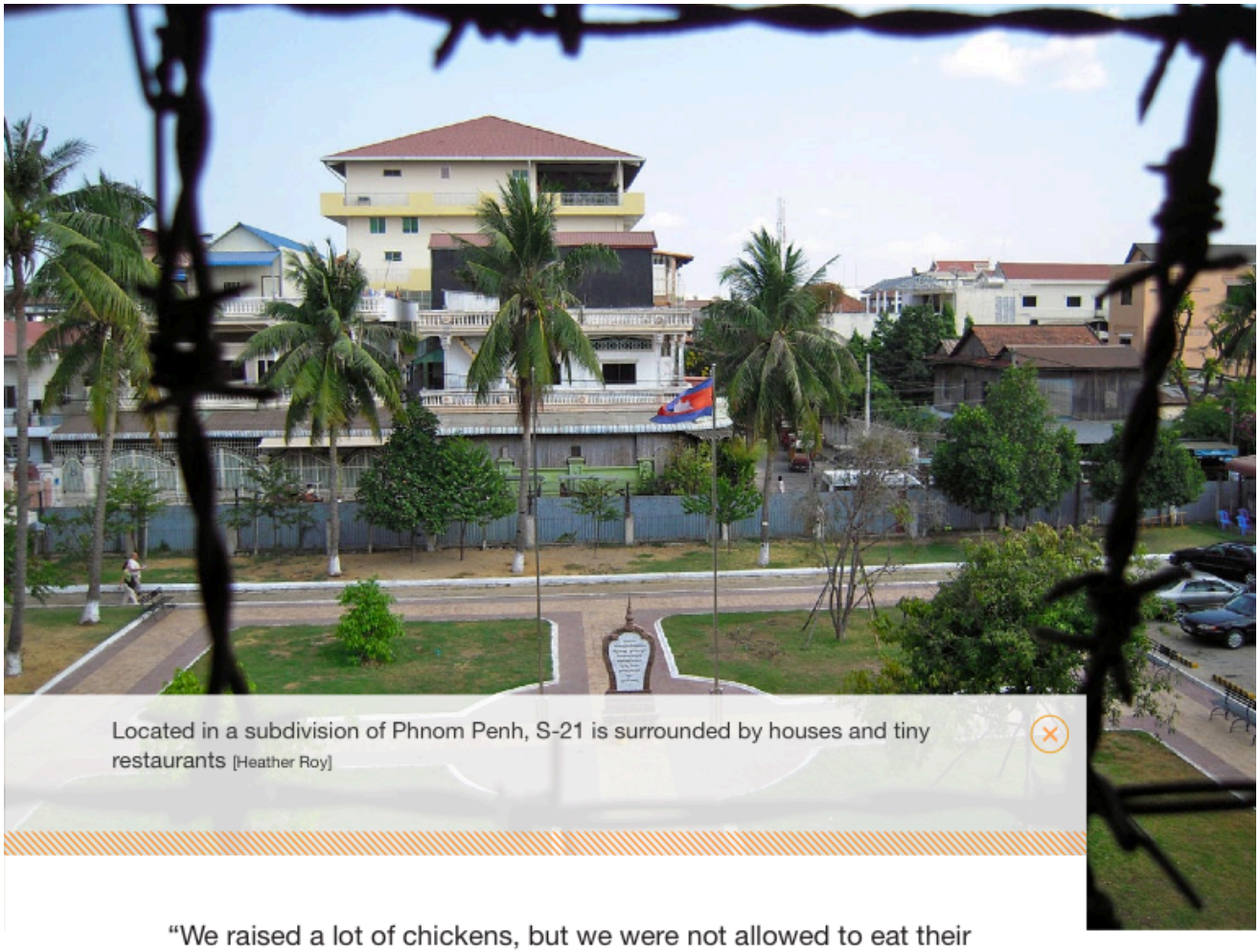
A childhood remembered

Halfway across the country from Eam, in Winnipeg, a man named Sorpong Peou shares some of his memories with me. He is almost twice Eam's age. The one thing he cannot forget about April 1975 is the dust. Sweltering heat sucked all the water out of the ground and engulfed Cambodia in a perpetual cloud. It was the dry season. Grit dug into the then teenager's eyes and left them infected, but he didn't think much of it as he lay face down on the floor. The significance of his temporary blindness was only apparent years later. Peou would reflect on how the last time he saw his father, he didn't actually see him. It would become his favourite memory – savouring his touch and the sound of his voice.

"He came to me because I couldn't open my eyes and he kissed me on the cheek and he said, 'I have to go now, will be back in a few days'."

But he never returned.

In his office at the University of Winnipeg, where he was chair of the politics department when I spoke to him, Peou sits surrounded by rows and piles of books. The titles give away his interest in justice, but not his personal connection to it. *The United Nations System: Toward International Justice, The Anarchical Society* and *Making War & Building Peace* lean against other books on shelves fastened to a concrete wall. Piles of paper are scattered across the floor. He is in the middle of writing another book – his fifth. A dusting of white chalk covers part of his right sleeve. The 55-year-old still has thick, black hair, although wisps of grey are starting to appear just above his ears. His childhood was a long time ago, but he recounts it with vividness.



Located in a subdivision of Phnom Penh, S-21 is surrounded by houses and tiny restaurants [Heather Roy]

"We raised a lot of chickens, but we were not allowed to eat their eggs," he laughs. The chickens were family pets, not a source of food. Nam, Peou's father, was a peaceful man who trained as a Buddhist monk; the sort of person, Peou says, who "would never kill a mosquito". So, chickens and eggs were out of the question.

Nam worked for the ministry of the interior's security department until 1975 when security ceased to exist. Peou remembers hearing stories of how his father would catch thieves and smugglers only to take pity on them and let them go. But when Khmer Rouge soldiers appeared at the Peou family home, they failed to show Nam the same sympathy. He was asked to accompany them to Phnom Penh to "greet Prince Sihanouk". Few realised then that a brutal regime simmered within Cambodia or that the government was toppling.

Nam, as a member of that government, was considered a traitor and slated for execution. Peou anxiously awaited his father's return.



A complicated relationship

With his large eyes and thick-rimmed glasses, Eam could pass for much younger than his 28 years. But he possesses the wisdom and self-reflection of somebody much older; of somebody weathered by both happy and traumatic experiences. As a child, he was very small, but he assures me his size was no indication of how much noise he could make. He is still the loudest of the three Eam children.

He describes his family as quiet and awkward. They do not discuss the past. Born in Pratchinburi, Thailand, Eam came to Canada when he was a baby. And that is all he knows aside from a few details scraped together over the years. He says his father tells a story of looking out of the airplane window over Vancouver Island and seeing nothing but trees. He feared they had been sent to live in a forest.

At that time, the Cambodian community was strong and supportive. While now people only get together for a New Year's celebration once every April, then families would gather at Beaver Lake Park in Victoria, where Eam and the other children would splash around in the water trying to catch fish with their bare hands. "That was a lot of fun ... just chasing them," he remembers. Mothers prepared Cambodian dishes and barbequed specially seasoned shish kabob meats. "You can't get it anywhere really. So, I still love it and I just remember eating it all the time." Parents would set up volleyball nets and play for hours while their children ran around.

But Eam admits that his childhood had its share of difficulties. One night, when he was in middle school, his mother woke him and his brother up to ask them who they would choose to live with if she left their father. "I heard them fight all the time and I hated it," says Eam.



His mother started working seven days a week to avoid spending time at home. Then, when Eam was in grade 11, she had a stroke. As he watched his mother transform from a once lively and sociable woman into a quiet version of her former self, Eam blamed his father. When he learned that his parents had survived the Cambodian genocide, Eam wondered whether their experiences might help to explain their complicated relationship. But he didn't know how to ask and, with his mother still recovering from her stroke, the time never seemed quite right. "I was confused a lot of the time because I didn't know how to handle what was going on," he explains.



Sharing the past

Back in Peou's office in Winnipeg, I ask him why Cambodian parents don't share their experiences of the Khmer Rouge years with their children. His response is immediate. "How do you know they don't share?" he asks me.

I scramble to rephrase. "How would you comment on the media's emphasis that there is silence surrounding the Khmer Rouge years?"

Some people talk, but most don't have time and others just want to move on, he explains. "I haven't written a book about myself, right? I have so much to talk about – to say – but I haven't written anything. So it's not that they really want to be silent." Plus, he isn't convinced that children are always interested in hearing their parents' stories. And, as a father of two young daughters, Peou admits that pain can also be a barrier. "It's difficult … to share with your own children," he reflects.

Peou witnessed Cambodia's Killing Fields firsthand.

It wasn't long after his father was taken away that the Khmer Rouge evacuated the cities. Peou thought it was a game. "At the time, the Khmer Rouge came and said something like 'you have 24 hours to leave your home'." The family was told they would be allowed to return in a few days. So they left with nothing but a bag of rice and some pots and pans. "We were forced to get out of the house at gunpoint and we were, you know, on the march," he says. The dusty road was lined with soldiers yelling at people to "keep going". Peou, who had never before been deep in the jungle, recalls the journey with excitement as though describing an adventure. But then his voice reduces to a whisper as he remembers the cold nights when there was nothing to eat and no shelter.

Peou asks me if I have ever seen the movie *The Killing Fields*. He has watched it once and never wants to see it again. He describes it as being too real and yet not real enough.

The Khmer Rouge regime tried to achieve its agrarian utopia through forced farming and Peou was forced into hard labour. Along with five other boys, he served as human oxen, pulling a plough through fields. After a month, they barely looked human. Exhausted and starved, Peou eventually collapsed in the mud. There was never enough food. "We ate insects, we ate mice, we ate tree roots," he remembers.

He sucks in his cheeks to demonstrate how emaciated his face looked and reflects on how hunger can drive people to do things they wouldn't under other circumstances. The Khmer Rouge did not allow pets; soldiers didn't want dogs to bark as they spied on people at night. Instructions were given to "eliminate them or they would be eliminated," Peou says. His family had two puppies. Peou found a bag and placed the animals inside. "We were so hungry," he says. As the oldest of seven children, the responsibility fell on him. They had to eat. Once the puppies were in the bag, he smashed them to make soup. "I always remember … that I killed beautiful puppies," he says.

"There were terrifying moments when one of my colleagues was taken away and executed a few yards away. And you always thought that tonight is maybe your night."

That memory is not the only one that haunts Peou. As we sit in the comfort of his office, his mind travels back to a time when no one felt safe. After he collapsed, Peou couldn't do physical labour. So, the Khmer Rouge let him work in a blacksmith shop. "There were terrifying moments when one of my colleagues was taken away and executed a few yards away. And you always thought that tonight is maybe your night," he says. Rumours started circulating about the executions, but Peou only witnessed one. After that, he refused to watch any others.

A large crowd of thin, exhausted faces gathered around a ditch. Everyone was dressed in black – the uniform of the entire country.

They wanted to see what was going on – to confirm the rumours with their own eyes. A man and woman were charged with adultery. At the time, this could have meant anything. Virtually everything was illegal.

"No romance. No flirting. No fornication. No dating. No wet dreaming. No masturbating. No naked sleepers. No bathers. No nakedness in showers. No love songs. No love letters. No affection. No marrying. No divorcing. No marital conflicts. No fighting. No profanity. No cursing." These are lines from a poem called *The New Regime*. A copy of it sits in Security Prison 21 – a school turned torture camp turned museum. It is 82 lines long and paints a picture of life under the Khmer Rouge; of life in a prison without walls.

The man and woman were lined up at the edge of the ditch, Peou remembers. Each was clubbed on the back of the head and, with one blow, their bodies collapsed, face-first into the pit. But that wasn't enough. The cadres turned the limp bodies over and, with a knife, cut out their organs, which they displayed to the crowd. Peou gasps for air. A look of horror is etched across his face. "They didn't die right away," he says.

When the imagination runs wild

It is a rainy Sunday afternoon when I sit with Eam in a boardroom at the University of British Columbia's School of Journalism. It is a neutral, professional space – somewhere Eam thought he would feel most comfortable as we tackled some uncomfortable questions. We talk at a long, worn table.

"Did your parents meet in the refugee camp?" I ask.

"To tell you the truth … I have no idea where they met."

“Did your parents flee Cambodia together?”

“I don’t even know that. I don’t know if they fled together.”

“How much do you feel you know about your heritage?”

“I don’t know a lot,” he says.

He tells me again about the project he completed at school, but admits that the books he read didn’t provide much of an insight into his own family’s background.

“I do lack a lot of knowledge in terms of, like, what does it mean to my parents?” he says.

“When you started to learn about the history, what did you wonder about your parents?”

Eam wishes he knew what his parents were doing during the Khmer Rouge regime, how and where they met, why they married, what they experienced in Cambodia, how they felt about it and how they survived. Most of all, he wants to understand them.

I press him about why he has hesitated to ask these questions of his parents. He brings up his mother’s stroke, the fact that the time just never really seemed right, before nervously asking me to repeat the question.

“Why haven’t you asked them yet?” I say.

“It’s too … it’s too hard …. Maybe I’m afraid to know the answer,” he replies. “What if it was easier to get out of the refugee camps if you had kids?”

It is estimated that, during the four years they were in power, the Khmer Rouge forced more than 250,000 marriages regardless of existing relationships. The regime tore apart families. Children were told they no longer needed parents because Angkar, the ruling body of the Khmer Rouge, would care for them. Eam is afraid to learn that his parents never loved each other, that he is the result of something unwanted.

A refugee camp, but not a place of refuge

Peou spent a lot of time thinking about death while the Khmer Rouge was in power. He knew his father was probably dead. He even imagined his own death. Soldiers would come for him. He hoped for a single bullet through the head, but knew that would never happen. “The Khmer Rouge wanted to save their bullets,” he tells me. They preferred knives, sticks and clubs. He knew his death would be painful and not unlike the public execution he so wished to forget. “Imagine what would happen if they rip your tummy open and take your liver, your stomach, your heart out,” he says. “Thinking about how you would be executed is not a pleasant experience.” The scene played over and over in his mind for years.

The Khmer Rouge even chased Peou’s dreams to Canada where he knew he had escaped death by execution – although only narrowly. When the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1979 and ended the four-year Khmer Rouge regime, Peou was told that his entire family had been on the execution list. Without the invasion, they would have died.

Two months later, as Cambodians started to piece their lives back together, Peou was tending his buffalo when the village chief approached and warned him: “You have to leave because the Vietnamese think that you’re a spy.” Trust was one of the casualties of the Khmer Rouge. Fearing arrest, Peou fled alone in the middle of the night, leaving his mother and six siblings behind. He walked around 150km to the border through jungle and minefields, where he briefly joined the resistance movement, before settling into a refugee camp with roughly 100,000 other Cambodians. Eventually, he went back for his family.

I ask Peou if he ever thought his father might still be alive. I wondered if he had any concerns about leaving Cambodia for Thailand before he had confirmation of his father’s death.

He says the family talked about him all the time and that his mother never gave up hope and never remarried. She clung to a sign she received just before leaving Cambodia. “There was an old lady who came to my mother [and said], ‘you know that your husband is not dead? He’s alive. He’s kept somewhere. But you will not see him until you both are so old that you cannot recognise each other in time for a family reunion’.” Peou didn’t think much of the conversation.

Thai refugee camps were not pleasant places. Hundreds of thousands of Cambodians lived in cloth tents crammed together along the border – an endless sea of patterned sheets suspended by sticks and string. The refugee camp had two personalities, according to Peou. Run by United Nations officials during the day, when the sun went down the Thai military took over and could, on occasion, rival the Khmer Rouge in their ruthlessness.

Early one morning, at around two o'clock, Peou was sleeping beside a friend when some soldiers came and dragged the friend out of bed. They beat him so badly that he had to be taken to hospital. "He was close to death," Peou says. His crime: not sleeping under a mosquito net. Peou tells another story of a friend who left his tent to go to the bathroom. Soldiers shot him dead.

It was unusual that all seven Peou children and their mother survived the regime and managed to flee together. Other families put up posters and wandered around trying to find missing relatives. Some were lucky. Many were not.

From photos to real time

Eam carries around a picture on his computer. It's a colour photograph of the refugee camp where he was born. If no one told you where the picture was taken, you might think it was a family reunion. There is no endless sea of tents or gun-wielding soldiers. Straw huts are bathed in early evening sunlight. Women and men stand in a long, straight line along a dirt path. They are serving themselves dinner. Everyone wears vibrant sarongs, shirts and scarves. A woman stands at a table scooping rice into green, red and yellow bowls. Some people smile and others stare expressionless. Eam's father wears a bright yellow shirt and black pants. He gazes at his wife as she stands in the food line. A mountain rises in the background.

This picture offers Eam an image of where he came from. Until a family trip to Cambodia in 2006, where Eam and his sister, Linda, met their grandparents, he had few other images. He remembers landing in Phnom Penh and thinking it looked old and rundown. His parents insisted they spend some time in the countryside to understand what life is like for many Cambodians. The family would sit outside, talk and share meals together. Eam's grandmother would gently flick mosquitoes away from the children with her scarf. The month-long trip offered him an insight into the origins of some of his parents' personality traits. "My mum's family is very caring. And my mum's very caring," he says, describing his father's side of the family as more entrepreneurial and intense.

Despite this personal glimpse into his heritage, Eam still wanted to see remnants of the genocide with his own eyes. But Choeung Ek and Security Prison 21, or S-21 as it is often called, were off limits.

S-21 is located in a subdivision of Phnom Penh. Surrounded by houses and tiny restaurants, it used to be the neighbourhood school. But for four years it served as one of the regime's notorious torture camps. It is now a museum. Tourists pass through classroom after classroom where blood-stained floors, torture devices and photographs of emaciated people leave little space for interpretation. Walls were blasted through to construct cells out of bricks and mortar. Paintings show men and women shackled to the floor. Only the Khmer Rouge decided who could die. Suicide was not an option.

Eam reflects on his trip to Cambodia where he spent a month exploring the place of his family's origins without seeing a single Khmer Rouge site. He assumes his family was trying to shield him from the gruesome details. He remembers his sister asking to visit the Killing Fields, but, he says "none of our family would allow us to go. Nor would they want to talk about it".

Learning to find peace

Unlike Eam, Peou doesn't need pictures to know what happened in Cambodia. He carries his memories with him. Studying peace, justice and Cambodia's history has helped him to come to terms with much of the pain. "The excessive use of violence is just beyond belief … beyond my imagination," he reflects. Peou's goal is to understand the ruthlessness. For him, knowing why the genocide happened is more important than taking revenge.

While in Thailand, Peou taught himself English. He helped process paperwork for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the American embassy and resettlement organisations that worked in the refugee camp. Despite this, his own application to the US was rejected. An employee at the embassy offered to help and suggested Canada as an option. The whole family was approved. "The moment the plane took off, we knew that we would not go back to the past," he says. But Peou still thought of his father.

In Canada, Peou washed dishes at a fast-food restaurant and began working as a pastor. Feeling unfulfilled, he enrolled at the University of Waterloo to study politics. He left for university with $300 in the bank and a student loan to cover his tuition costs. Every morning from 5am until 9am he cleaned toilets at Mother's Pizza. "It was tough, but not that hard compared to what I went through in Cambodia … and in the refugee camp," he says.

Years later, he had a vivid dream in which his father was alive. A series of strange events followed. His brother, Phyrun, owned a restaurant that had fallen on hard times. He went to a psychic to seek business advice. That psychic told him that his father was alive. Feeling sceptical, the family sent another sibling. The psychic told her the same thing. This sparked two trips and months of searching in Thailand and Cambodia.

When their search resulted in no leads, Phyrun, the second oldest of the Peou children, returned to Poipet, a village where the family lived before the Khmer Rouge years. Finding nothing there, he decided to give up. On his last night in the village, Phyrun went for a walk. He came across a frail, old man who was begging. Phyrun had put up posters with Nam's picture and sent out radio broadcasts. People on the street told the old man that his son was looking for him, but the man insisted he had no children – they had all been executed, he said. Phyrun took the man back to his hotel room, let him shower, bought him new clothes and gave him five dollars for a bus ticket home. He was stick-thin with sunken cheeks and poor vision. He came from deep in the jungle near the Vietnam/Cambodia border.

Phyrun travelled to the man's house every weekend after that. After three months, the man eventually confessed that he was afraid to admit he had children. Some people are still scared to talk about the regime.

The family tested him with questions. He knew the birthdays of all seven Peou children and their names. He liked and disliked the same foods as Nam. He was remarried and had six other children. Peou asked those children what their father was like when they were growing up.

“We didn’t have food to eat,” they told him. “But when we went and caught cod fish, [and] took them home, he released all the fish.” Peou laughed recalling his own family’s swarm of pet chickens and their off-limits eggs.

Nam Peou was alive.

But the reunion has not been without its challenges. Nam’s wife will not allow his old family to spend time with him. She is afraid that they will take him to Canada. Last year, Peou, his mother and brother travelled into the jungle to see Nam. His wall-less house stood on four pillars with a roof and a dirt floor. Peou felt pained by his father’s poverty. He desperately wants to know what happened to Nam during the Khmer Rouge years and the subsequent 36. But Nam is traumatised and, Peou explains, “each time he opened up, he would choke. He couldn’t take it”.

Nam can’t remember all the things he used to do with his children before 1975 – he can’t recall the memories that his son has cherished for all these years. For Peou, talking about the past is the only way to rebuild their relationship. “I feel like I want to hug him. But I can’t. The first time I met him last year, I hugged when I first met him, but I never felt close.”

Peou's father is a stranger and, with little ability to discuss the past, will likely remain one. The reunion has raised happy emotions, but also dug up a lot of sorrow. Before he married, Peou claims he would have given up everything, including his PhD, to go back to pre-1975 Cambodia to be with his father. "That's how attached I was or I am to him," he says. But Nam is not the man that lives on in Peou's memory. That man died on a hot, dusty day in April 1975.

One day, when the time is right

Eam admits that his father has told him one or two stories about the Khmer Rouge. The journey to Thailand was long and dangerous. His father travelled in a group. When they reached a river, people were pulled across using a rope. A few couldn't swim. One woman slipped and drowned in front of everyone. Landmines threatened each step through the jungle. Eam says his father saw somebody trip over a wire mine and die. "He pretty much explained to me that the group that they left with was much smaller by the time they got to Thailand," he concludes.

But the few stories Eam has heard do not reveal much about his father's experience during the regime. And his mother refuses to share any stories at all. Eam thinks his family would be closer if they knew more about each other. "I think that's a big, empty gap in the relationship that we have with each other. It's just ... we don't know our parents." He wants to be able to share stories with his own children.

I asked Eam if he could bring some pictures to our interview. He selected 17 – the ones that he keeps on his computer. A long time ago he went through family albums, picked out the images he liked the most and scanned them. A shot of two young people stands out amongst a collection of smiling babies. The woman is wearing a long fuchsia sarong with stripes and a white collared shirt. The man is wearing navy blue pants and a green and white Worldsport jersey. A curl of black hair skims his forehead. Their arms dangle at their sides. Their hands aren't touching. Neither is smiling. They are standing at the foot of what looks like a tiny bridge leading off a dirt path. A thatched roofed hut nestles among trees in the background. They are Eam's parents and he keeps the photo because he says his parents look happy in it. "They're there together. It's nice. It's not like they had to be there together."

I ask Eam where and when the photo was taken, but he doesn't know.

"I will ask," he says, "next time."