

## Mr. Nouch Mao

Age: 55

Kampot Province

Before the Khmer Rouge, my parents were farmers. Although we did not earn much money, we lived a simple and happy life. But very soon after the Khmer Rouge came into my village, the happiness in my family disappeared, and life drastically changed forever.



My parents, my sisters and brothers were forcibly separated from each other and made to work very hard in different labor and living groups. I was forced to abandon my vows as a Buddhist monk. The Khmer Rouge especially despised monks and religious people, because they believed that monks were parasitical worms, getting food without ever working for it. They destroyed all the Buddhist statues, banned religious practices, and turned the pagoda, once the center of celebration and village life, into a prison and torture center.

The Khmer Rouge came into my village in 1974. They forced people here to do everything collectively – both working and eating. All personal belongings were removed because they just wanted to create only one class - the farmer class. They classified people into three types of farmers: rich farmer, middle-class farmer, and poor farmer. After this classification, they arrested all the rich and middle-class farmers to kill. My family was first classified as “poor farmer,” so we managed to escape the first round of killing. But everything was unstable here, and things change rapidly from day to day.

One day, Khmer Rouge spies came to arrest my mother from her work group. The people who were arrested previously told the Khmer Rouge that my mother was the former chief of a fifty-member unit of the KGB. When I arrived from work, my father and my sister told me about her arrest. We all cried so much because we were so helpless and knew that there was nothing we could do to save her. The Khmer Rouge spies imprisoned her at the local pagoda. The pagoda was only 100 meters from my house, but I knew I could not go to see her, and we all knew that she could not come back home.

I heard from one guard in this prison that my mother had been tortured very violently before she died. She was stripped naked and hung upside down by her tied legs. Then, they hit her with a heavy whipping rope and bamboo stick. Her head was plunged into a jar full of water during the interrogation, but she continued to keep quiet. During the interrogation, they also tortured her by burning her body, her mouth, and her private areas until she died. Afterwards, they left her dead body in front of the pagoda like an animal, but when the old people living near the pagoda saw that, they buried her in the

field in front of the pagoda. My mother only survived in that prison for one night and one day before she died. I was very shocked and angry, but I could not do anything against the people that killed my mother. If I did, I would be killed too.

After my mother died, my father was withdrawn from his group and sent to work in another group. In the new group, he had to work much harder without receiving any food to eat. Soon after, he was moved to another new work group, where he also did not receive food. The Khmer Rouge then accused him of networking with traitors. Because of the lack of food, my father soon died of starvation.

My older sister was sent to work in a women's group nearby. They forced her to work very hard with only a little food to eat. She was forced to carry heavy loads of dirt until she became very ill, but the Khmer Rouge cadres still forced her to work. They beat my sister, and they told her she was being lazy and only trying to get out of work by pretending to be ill. She soon died in the hospital.

My younger brother and younger sister were put in a children's labor group. They were ordered to collect cow dung and grass to make fertilizer. They only survived because they were allowed to work closer to their home, where the community elders knew my parents. They helped look after my sister and brother and also gave them additional food if they had it.

I was sent to work far away in Kampong Speu Province. I was assigned to help build a dam with the youth labor group. Life in that youth group was very difficult because I was ordered to work from 7 a.m. until 5 p.m. Although this was tough manual labor, they just gave me one scoop of watery rice porridge to eat per day. So, I often snuck away from my labor group to catch rodents and forage for wild fruit, morning glory, and other plants growing in the wild to eat while no one was looking.

My work group was made up of about 150 people, and we all slept on the ground in a small shelter about 8x5 meters large in the forest. The shelter was a structure made up of scavenged wood, debris, leaves, and branches. I also picked leaves from the *phlong* tree to use on the ground as a bed for sleeping. When it rained, I could not sleep at all because the ground would become wet and muddy and many poisonous snakes would come in from the forest looking for shelter in our makeshift house. Many people died during this time from snake bites or malaria. About 300 people from my village were sent with me to work in the labor group over there, but only 150 people survived and could eventually return home.

In 1978, after the dam was finished, I was emaciated, starving, and very sick so I was allowed to have a short time to rest. I walked the whole night home. I went to the hospital in my home region and was allowed to stay for five days with other sick people from my group. Most of the people in my work group became paralyzed and could not walk after they had finally reached the hospital.

After five days in the hospital, I was forced to leave and sent to work somewhere else. There, the Khmer Rouge ordered me to dig one large hole every day. If I could not finish this task, I would get severely punished. After work, the Khmer Rouge held reeducation meetings until 11 p.m. Only after this meeting was finished could we then go to sleep.

That same year, I married my wife. Not long after our marriage, Vietnamese troops came to our village and pushed the Khmer Rouge to the western side of the country. During all the fighting, my wife and I escaped. On the way back to our home village, I found my younger brother and sister. Together, we walked the long distance back home.

The spies who arrested my mother are now living in my village. I am still angry with them, but I cannot do anything. I cannot seek revenge because our country now has laws and respects human rights. But I always remember the Buddhist proverb: Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love. This means that even though we may experience hatred or evil, we cannot take revenge or spread evil. By remembering this proverb, I can relieve my anger.

Although I could not properly bury the remains of my mother and my older sister in a Buddhist ceremony, I always think of them in all the ceremonies we celebrate. I am also thankful that I can share my story to the next generation of Cambodians as well as the world so that people do not forget what happened here.

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