

Mr. Tolors Tahat

Age: 65

My name is Tolors Tahat, and I am 65 years old. Before the arrival of Khmer Rouge soldiers in our village, my family had a high standard of living. My father was well-educated and very influential among the Cham people. He was a high-ranking official in the government. At that time, I had only completed part of high school, but I was still one of the richest people in my community because of my agricultural business. I grew all kinds of crops to sell, which helped me earn a large amount of money. In addition, I knew how to repair the rice grinder, as well as other common machines. With my business doing well, I felt that I could comfortably take care of my family.

However, once the Khmer Rouge took over around 1973, everything completely changed. All my hopes for the future and my happiness crumbled along with my comfortable lifestyle. I was quickly arrested and sent to prison without having committed any crime.

Because my father was one of the most influential people among the Cham, and because he was well-educated, he understood many of the country's political issues. The Khmer Rouge therefore blacklisted him immediately. However, my father understood that he needed to escape early on and thus, he avoided arrest. Unfortunately, nearly every other member of my family remained at home, and we were then arrested and sent to prison. The Khmer Rouge would not make exceptions for our family, not even my older sister who had just given birth and was still nursing her baby. Because everyone was being arrested in my family, one of my younger brothers decided to jump into the river and swim away.

Life in prison was one of the most traumatic memories I have of living under the Khmer Rouge. I told myself to never let people know about these memories except for my wife and my children. I want these bad memories to disappear; I want them to be forgotten.

At the prison, once the house of a prosperous doctor in the district, we were mistreated and starved. We were only given a little bit of watery rice porridge to eat, which did not provide us enough sustenance to survive. Us prisoners, we considered ourselves lucky if we could catch the cockroaches to eat! And since cockroaches were the only extra things we could find to eat, we became very territorial over our space. We would go as far as to fight over who had the right to eat whatever insect that flew into our quarters, depending on what space this insect flew into.

The Khmer Rouge guards tortured all the prisoners there in a number of ways. I was only allowed to bathe once every six months with dirty pond and floodwater. This water always contained some kind of animal waste or rotting plants. When we were allowed to bathe, this was also the only time our ankles were released from the shackles.

Every couple of months, we would be severely interrogated. The Khmer Rouge guards were trained to look for any signs of an inappropriate response from us. If we gave any response that differed even slightly from what we were supposed to say, we would be immediately killed.

My mother and my brother had a more difficult experience than I did in prison. My mother, she died in the prison because of her cancer. Her wounds became infested with lice and worms, which caused her to die a very slow and painful death in that dark prison. As I watched her die, I felt so ashamed to be her son because I was absolutely powerless to help her.

Luckily, the Khmer Rouge guards never tortured me because they, as well as some other Khmer Rouge cadres in the area, realized that they could benefit from my skills. They needed someone to

cut their hair for them, and since I used to also be a well-known barber in my village, they gave me an opportunity to help them and avoid getting tortured.

My assigned job by the Khmer Rouge allowed me to have special treatment. I was allowed to eat more food than the other prisoners, and I was also allowed to work as a team leader. Besides cutting hair, I was responsible for repairing the rice grinder when it was not working. This task also gave me another opportunity to receive a little bit more rice and salt to eat, but because everyone I worked with received very little food, I tried to share my extra food.

One time, I asked one of the team members in my work group to help deliver the food to all the other team members. Unfortunately, one of the team members did not receive their extra portion, and he immediately reported this to the Khmer Rouge security guards. Since I was the team leader, they blamed me for the unequal treatment. After a few questions from the guards, I heard a loud *pow* sound in my head. After a moment of being stunned, my head exploded with intense pain and I realized then that I had been hit with a metal wrench. The pain of that blow lasted for over a year.

To this day, I still wonder about the reasoning behind the arrests of most of the people in my family; was it really just because my father was a well-educated and influential man among the Cham people? How did the Khmer Rouge see that reasoning as justified? While I don't want to remember my bad experiences during the Pol Pot regime, I believe that it is important for the youth to understand and to remember that terrible time period.

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