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## Opinion: Finding My Family's Story in 'First They Killed My Father'

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by Guest Contributor | February 21, 2017

On Saturday night, I was lucky enough to attend the premiere of "First They Killed My Father" and I had the privilege of bringing my family with me. By my side was my wife Sophea born exactly nine months after the fall of Phnom Penh my children and my mom.

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My two daughters, Sayana, 13, and Clara, 6, and my son Eden, 11, were all born in Cambodia and have lived here all their lives. My mother was born in Siem Reap. She lived in Cambodia through the whole period of the war, survived and immigrated to Canada with me and my dad.



Angelina Jolie arrives at a news conference in Siem Reap province on Saturday. (Pring Samrang/Reuters)

I invited my dad to the premiere, but he didn't want to join us. He said he did not need to see the film.

For him, no image could represent what he saw with his own eyes as he lived through that time. So he stayed at home while the rest of us arrived at the temple complex, where we were met by the excitement of a world premiere—a red carpet, a king and a Hollywood star.

Together we sat, three generations from 6 to 66 years old, and watched the film. We were sitting between students and villagers. Throughout the screening, we heard joy, surprise, tears and laughter.

Together we saw the story unfold, accompanied by the public reactions of the audience. On screen we saw beautiful scenes of rice fields that invoke nostalgia in every Cambodian.

As I sat in the outdoor temple setting, I could feel the uniquely Cambodia weather; blanketed by humidity, with a fresh cool breeze on my skin, I experienced sensations of my childhood that I had long forgotten.

Then, in the car on the way home, something unexpected happened. It began with a question from my son, asking me how long I lived through the Khmer Rouge.

My mom, who is a typical Cambodian housewife who never speaks about that time, answered first. She told him, "Your grandma and grandpa lived through the four years of the Khmer Rouge. Your dad was born during the Khmer Rouge and lived through it for three years. Your

grandpa was also a soldier of Lon Nol and had to escape from the Khmer Rouge by walking to the border of Thailand.”

My daughter asked how long it took us to walk. Again my mom answered, “It took us three days and three nights walking through the jungle. Your grandpa tied your dad to his chest using a krama. Your dad was so skinny. For one whole day and one whole night we did not have water and food, but your dad did not cry.” “I remember the Khmer Rouge was running after us,” she continued.

“I heard gunshots and bombs exploding. I was exhausted and did not have the strength to keep going. At that point, I told your grandpa to keep running. I told him to take your dad, and leave me here; I was too tired to run. Then, keeping your dad in one hand, he grabbed me with his other hand. He kept pulling me and finally we all escaped safely.” That 30-minute car journey was the first time I have ever heard the story of how my family escaped the Khmer Rouge.

I probably should have asked long ago but, maybe like many of my fellow Cambodians, I never dared. The next morning, I woke at 5 in the morning to write a letter. I was writing to the film’s creators: Loung Ung, who wrote the book of her own life story that it is based on; Angelina Jolie; and my dear friend Rithy Panh, the film’s co-producer.

I needed to thank them. The story they shared on screen brought out an untold story in my family. That story and its telling is a gift I will treasure for the rest of my life. It’s the kind of gift that only artists have the power to give.



Angelina Jolie, right, greets Queen Mother Norodom Monineath as King Norodom Sihamoni looks on, at the premier of the film “First They Killed My Father” in Siem Reap City on Saturday. (Amanda Boury)

Artists have a special way of unearthing memories that we have long kept buried, and triggering feelings we have tried to forget. I am a strong believer in the power of the arts to transform people, communities and societies.

Through my work at Cambodian Living Arts, I have witnessed the transmission of culture, stories and history between generations.

On Saturday night, thanks to the film, I experienced firsthand a collective healing in my own family. That past was too far from me to remember, and yet too close to my parents for me to ask. I have never been able to share that part of me to my children (because I didn't know it).

That dialogue between my children and my mom is a shared experience I doubt any of us will ever forget. My youngest daughter, who is probably the same age as Loung in the film, sat on my lap for the whole screening. She was asking so many questions: "Why did Loung's father die? Why are the Khmer Rouge so bad?" When she got tired, I held her in my arms.

At that same moment, the image of Loung holding her father before he was taken away by the Khmer Rouge appeared on screen, and tears came to my eyes. I could feel the feeling of all fathers going through that time of conflict.

The feeling of a father holding his child, whispering sweet words, trying to create hope of a better tomorrow. Although this film is a Cambodian story, at its heart it is a story of a tragedy of humanity, that we see continuing around the world today.

I wish that through this story of Cambodia, we can remind the world that war is not the solution. As a member of a family that survived the Khmer Rouge, I urge young people to watch this film.

Through the resilient stories of each of the characters in the film, I hope it will inspire future generations not to fall back. To the filmmakers, I simply say thank you. As a father and as a son, thank you for allowing me to cry.

***Disclaimer:*** *The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Cambodia Daily.*

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