

5 THE KILLING FIELDS



On our last day in Cambodia we visited the Siem Reap Killing Fields Memorial. Myrtle and I had been dreading the visit and at one point had even talked about asking to be excused. But it is important in life to bear witness for those whose lives and worlds have been destroyed by evil. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge instituted the Cambodian genocide that resulted in the death of nearly one quarter of the Cambodian population. Our guide spoke to us on the bus about the memorial we were going to visit. “There are several hundred Killing Fields memorials in Cambodia. The largest one is in

Phnom Penh. Over the span of three years, eight months and twenty days over two million Cambodians were killed. Two million. The well-educated and the monks were the first ones killed by the Khmer Rouge. Here at Siem Reap they found 200-300 skulls in holes they excavated, mass burials from mass killings. A lot of people were killed inside the building we will visit, and when the Vietnamese came, they found many bones and skulls in that building. In the memorial you will see many bones. Some skull bones were not fused – were they children?

You see along the road the signs for land mines. They are still a problem in Cambodia, lots of landmines. Some people say that there were ten million land mines here. The Vietnamese were supported by Russia, so some of the land mines are Russian land mines. The Khmer Rouge was supported by China, so some are Chinese land mines. Many have been removed now, but there are probably several million land mines still left in Cambodia. There were three land-mine removal companies operating. One of them was British. The most dangerous areas are along the borders. The large homes you are passing belong to the people who grew rich on land after the war.

In Cambodia from 1970-1974 there were many different rulers in many different regions in the country. The king supported the Khmer Rouge in order to get his power back. He also engaged China. The Khmer Rouge got strong military aid from China, and they took power by military revolt. They stopped food coming into Phnom Penh. When the Khmer Rouge first went into Phnom Penh, the people welcomed them because they didn’t understand. The Khmer Rouge moved people out of Phnom Penh. By April of 1975 the Khmer Rouge took over the whole Cambodia. The Mekong River was like a river of blood from bodies killed and thrown in. Pol Pot said there could only be one class of people, workers, like the Chinese Communist party under Mao. So everyone had to become a worker in order to avoid being killed. They could not eat individually or privately but ate at long tables. They were given a bowl of rice soup. They had to work all day long on a bowl of soup. My parents told me to steal food whenever I could. I was four and five years old. My mother made me a big pocket in my pants and in my shirt so I could steal something to eat. If people were caught stealing, they were sent to a camp and were mostly killed. They were told, ‘You did something wrong. You have to be sent away to be re-educated.’ Then they never returned back home.

Mostly people were sent away at night. They were told to bring a shovel and then they had to dig a big hole in which they were buried, sometimes alive. Young kids were sent to special schools and

brainwashed to turn in or kill their own relatives and family. Some of the people are still alive who have killed their own families. But the guilty people are the leaders, not the common people. There was plenty of food, but people went hungry because all the rice was exported to China in exchange for weapons. Some people like my father had to pretend they were not educated, that they could not read or write. Sometimes the police tricked people into reading a letter so they could find out who could read and write. They would tell someone that the letter was from a relative, and then if the person would take the letter and try to read it, they would be arrested and disappear. The Khmer Rouge were Cambodians, but they killed their own people. They wanted to kill anyone educated or smart so they could be the only rulers, like the Chinese model. Now Cambodia has a former Communist leader and communist government, and now there is no choice.”

As we walked in the memorial grounds, our guide pointed out this howitzer and tank from the Pol Pot Regime. The killing gardens were doubly shocking and depressing because we think of gardens as places of refuge and peace, but these gardens were a memorial to a madman’s evil.



In the War Museum we were turned over to another guide, who escorted us through the exhibits. There was such suffering etched on this man’s face that it was hard for me to look at him. “During the Civil War 1970-1999 Pol Pot killed three million people including my whole family when I was eight years old. My wife was killed by a land mine in 2004. There are 4.5 million mines left now, two mines for every person living in Cambodia. I am blind in one eye, have lost one leg, have no gall bladder, have multiple scars from gun wounds. I got shot by an AK47 three times. My young friends 13 years old got blown up by a hand grenade when on a prank they stole a grenade to kill fish. My best friend pulled the pin and mistakenly threw the pin into the river and held on to the grenade. It blew up my best friend and four other friends.

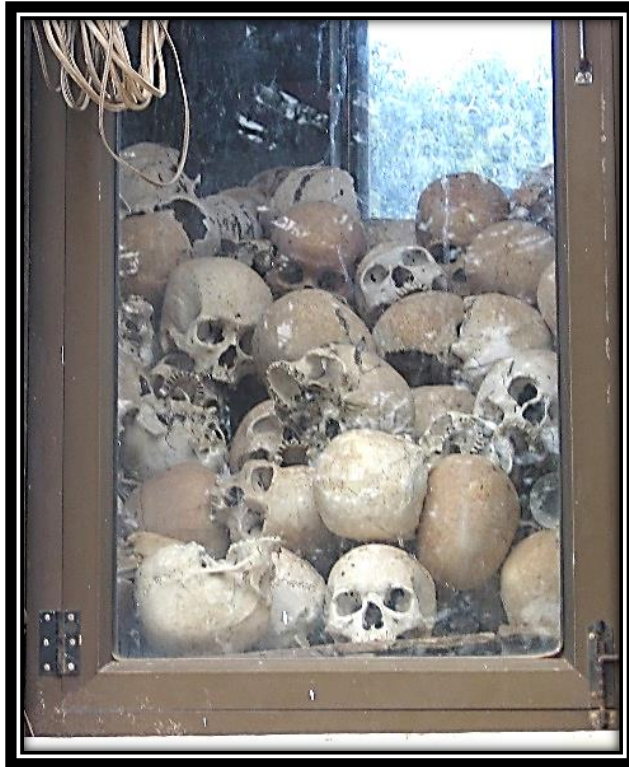
The Russians supported the Cambodian government, and the Chinese supported the Khmer Rouge. Pol Pot’s goal was genocide. He wanted everyone dead but his chosen, which included 13,000 pretty girls that he used and when they became impregnated, he sent them to Korea or China or other countries. The king was a playboy prior to Pol Pot; he also married Pol Pot’s sister. But Pol Pot put the king under house arrest. This country is still not open to tell the truth. The Cambodian People’s Party is the strongest of the three political parties, and it is Communist. Some of the people in the government today were members of the Khmer Rouge. The current king is their puppet. They made special contracts with the Vietnamese to let them into Cambodia to run things

like Angkor Wat, and now there are more and more illegal Vietnamese immigrants. There is lots of graft and corruption. The Cambodian People's Party is in power. There are many party headquarters around Siem Reap. They have strong military power. The election was not fair this time like in 1993 when the UN monitored it. Things are very different in Cambodia than in Vietnam, which has a government focused on taking care of its people, whereas those in power in Cambodia are focused on attaining personal wealth."

The guide left us to wander the exhibits alone, and many in our group were talking about the allegations that Pol Pot impregnated girls and sent them abroad to bear his children. None of us had heard that before. "Do you think that can be true?" "But how is it that we have never heard of it?" "He said the country is not free to tell the truth even today." "Are they afraid that there will be people wanting reparations from the government?" "But who would be brave enough to speak about something that shameful? Even if a girl had been raped by him, she would try to hide it for the sake of her child. What mother could bear to have it known that her child was the spawn of such a devil?" And there was much more along those lines.

Then it was time to visit the small building where the thousands of bones from Pol Pot's victims are displayed. I was so distraught that I did not notice until I saw this picture I had taken, that the young boy in the foreground was pointing us toward the building where the bones were. This was the boy who later came up to Myrtle and me when we were walking away crying. He wanted to give us each a small mango. That gesture did break my heart.





When we accepted the mangos from the boy, Myrtle had the presence of mind to say, “JoJo, he would like some coins.” She found some and gave them to him. With a huge smile he snatched them, gave a quick, bouncy salaam, and took off running. We watched him disappear into the small crowd of adults. Myrtle said quietly, “He doesn’t understand the meaning of these bones, the evil they represent; he only sees an opportunity to earn some coins.” I looked back at the memorial and responded, “I think there are no words in any language to explain such evil, Myrtle. Perhaps it is right, what he is doing. You and I and others like us bear witness to the suffering and tragedy, but this young entrepreneur and his generation need to focus on the future, rebuilding the country and the people. Perhaps that is the way it must be.”



We visited the part of the museum that featured the cultural history of Cambodia and found enchanting dioramas like this one featuring the god Hanuman. Our guide had told us, “The Khmer Rouge tried to destroy the Cambodian cultural heritage. Displays such as this one help bring back that heritage. I recommend that you also visit the nearby Buddhist temple. It is over 50 years old but completely restored. The paintings inside the temple are by several different artists, and they have all been painted within the last ten years. They all tell the stories of the life of Buddha.”



The temple was indeed restorative. The sense of peace and serenity we gained despite the nearby presence of the footprint of evil was as welcome as it was surprising. As we left to return to our bus, Myrtle once again took my hand and said, “JoJo, this has been an amazing once-in-a-lifetime experience. How lucky we are to have had this.” Amen.