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## Through the Dark Jungle: One Family's Escape from Cambodia's Genocide

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## Through the Dark Jungle: One Family's Escape from Cambodia's Genocide

### Abstract

During the 1970s, the communist Khmer Rouge ruled with an iron fist. As part of its "re-education" process, Cambodia residents were stripped of their possessions and forced to work in labor camps. Many lacked food, basic health care, and other necessities and, by the time the Vietnamese overthrew the Khmer Rouge in 1979, between one to two million people died. This oral history chronicled one family's story of survival and eventual escape from Cambodia's genocide. The researcher interviewed four family members, who recollected the events and presented accounts in their own words. The themes of living a harsh existence, fear, following orders, death and suffering, and support from others are explored as possible contributing factors to the family's survival.

### Keywords

Cambodia, Genocide Survivors, Khmer Rouge, Oral History, Qualitative Research

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### Acknowledgements

In memory of Dai"Gung" Li, a great father and man of quiet strength (October 1931-October 2015). I would like to thank Dr. Janet Richards at the University of South Florida for her advice in completing this research and article as well as the family featured in the article for trusting me with their story.

## Through the Dark Jungle: One Family's Escape from Cambodia's Genocide

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*During the 1970s, the communist Khmer Rouge ruled with an iron fist. As part of its "re-education" process, Cambodia residents were stripped of their possessions and forced to work in labor camps. Many lacked food, basic health care, and other necessities and, by the time the Vietnamese overthrew the Khmer Rouge in 1979, between one to two million people died. This oral history chronicled one family's story of survival and eventual escape from Cambodia's genocide. The researcher interviewed four family members, who recollected the events and presented accounts in their own words. The themes of living a harsh existence, fear, following orders, death and suffering, and support from others are explored as possible contributing factors to the family's survival. Keywords: Cambodia, Genocide Survivors, Khmer Rouge, Oral History, Qualitative Research*

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Survivors aren't always the strongest; sometimes they're the smartest, but more often simply the luckiest. (Ryan, n.d.)

Within hours, the soldiers would gun them down. The family had received word that they had made the "kill list." With no time to waste, the father decided that the family needed to leave. The father, mother and eight children left everything behind, except some gold and jewelry to bribe guards and barter for food. Under the cover of darkness, the family fled and moved from city to city, camp to camp. When sleeping, the females snuggled between the men, afraid they would be raped by outsiders. The family traversed the jungles and mountainsides of Cambodia, navigated landmines and enemy soldiers, and slipped into Thailand. After residing in a refugee camp, they relocated to the United States to start a new life. Many others they knew were imprisoned, tortured, or killed. "We were lucky to be alive," said HuYin Li, the oldest sister, who labored twelve hours a day building a dam before escaping and reuniting with her family. While the Li's story may read like a Hollywood movie script, it is very real. It is the story of a family surviving and clinging together under horrible circumstances. My purpose in researching and telling this story was to record and publish the participants' recollection of the events involving their survival and escape during the Cambodian genocide. As an emerging oral historian, I wanted to fill in the historical record by collecting first-hand experiences, and thus, preserve their stories and "leave a complete, candid, and reliable record as possible" (Ritchie, 2014, p. 8). In addition, the research would ideally contribute meaningful insights to the extant literature on the Cambodian Genocide, particularly the kind of work that provides a voice to survivors (DePaul, 1997) by sharing their perspectives, and in the process, teach us more about how they survived despite the death and destruction that surrounded them.

### Historical Context

A guerrilla group driven by communist ideals, the Khmer Rouge surfaced in Cambodia's northeastern jungles as early as the 1960s (Fletcher, 2009). In April 1975, the Communist Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, overthrew the existing Lon Nol government. They

renamed the country “Democratic Kampuchea” and after ending five years of foreign interventions, civil war, and bombardment, thousands of Phnom Penh residents celebrated in the streets (Knaub, 2014). Preparing for a radical shift to an agrarian society, the Khmer Rouge evacuated the entire population of the city—more than 2.5 million people—to camps in the countryside (Fletcher, 2009). Former doctors, teachers, and other professionals were stripped of possessions and forced to labor in fields as part of the reeducation process; those who complained or opposed the new rule were tortured in detention centers (History.com, 2009). Under Pol Pot’s reign, money, private property, most reading materials and religion were outlawed; children were taken from their homes and forced into the military or work camps (History.com, 2009). Residents had little to eat, marginal housing and clothing, poor sanitation and no healthcare or medical services (Knaub, 2014). Most Cambodians were forced to work 12 or more hours a day under inhumane conditions. Hundreds of thousands of Cambodians starved to death in rice fields (History.com, 2009). By the time Vietnamese forces overtook the Khmer Rouge in January 1979, Cambodia had endured a “holocaust of unbelievable magnitude” (Knaub, 2014, p. xxiii) and an estimated (accounts vary) 1 to 2 million people—or about a third of the country’s population—were killed (Fletcher, 2009; Panh, 2012).

### **How I Came to Tell This Family’s Story**

An acquaintance mentioned his family’s escape from Cambodia in passing. He said his family had traveled through the jungle at night and lived in a refugee camp in Thailand before settling in the United States. I became intrigued with the story and wanted to know more. The family agreed to discuss the events. The parents, with the oldest daughter serving as an interpreter, started to share details of their survival. The more I learned, the more intrigued I grew. The family’s story had never been recorded, and no artifacts (i.e., photographs, journals, or letters) existed since they were forced to leave personal belongings behind. While the grandchildren (eleven in total) had some knowledge of their parents’ and grandparents’ struggles, oral tradition, or passing stories down from generation to generation, had not been practiced. Furthermore, the stories had never been committed to writing. Knowing that the family’s history could be lost, this further motivated me to systemically record the events.

### **Methodology**

Oral history is a method of qualitative interview that emphasizes participants’ perspectives and allows researchers to gain in-depth knowledge (Leavy, 2011). During the oral history process, the study participant and the researcher form a collaborative relationship and are placed on the same plane during data collection. Through open-ended interviews, the researcher guides the process, and the participant engages in story telling (Leavy, 2011). Oral history methods enable the researcher to collect rich, descriptive data and find meaning within the collaborative process rather than “out there.” Oral history helps fill in the historical record by gathering first-hand experiences and provides understanding of the subjective experiences of historical events (Leavy, 2011). Effective interviewing provide background and personal insights rarely found in official documents; these features, along with oral history’s ability to capture and preserve information that may not otherwise be saved (Everett, 1992) convinced me that it was an appropriate methodology for this study.

## **The Study Participants**

Chao-xing Li was an 80-year-old Chinese woman and the mother of the family. She had been living in the United States since the late 1970s, following sponsorship by a church in the states. Her main language was Cantonese. Her parents had moved from China to Cambodia for a better life. During the genocide, she had remained mainly in her residence, caring for her young children, while some of her older children had been placed in work camps. Dai Li was an 83-year old male, the father of the family. He had been married to Chao-Xing for more than 50 years. He also spoke Cantonese as his main language. The Khmer Rouge forced him to work a variety of jobs before he decided the family should flee Cambodia. Hu Yin Li was the oldest daughter in the family. She was 12-years-old during the time of the genocide and worked in a camp most of the time. She later fled the camp and reunited with her family. Lien Hua Yin, third oldest daughter, was eight-years-old at the time. She was the last child to be taken from her family and forced to work in a camp. She escaped the camp and rejoined her family within hours of their leaving Cambodia to find refuge in Thailand. I selected these four family members as participants for the study since they were old enough at the time of the genocide to remember the events, and had the best recollection of the events and were accessible to discuss their experiences.

## **How I Conducted my Research**

Prior to the formal interviews and proposing the study, I spent several months establishing rapport with the participants. For example, I ate dinner with them and casually asked about their experiences in Cambodia. After obtaining approval from the Internal Review Board (IRB) and gaining written consent from the study participants, I conducted several interviews with each of the participants. The interviews were conducted in my home or the participants' home. I conducted several interviews while one of the study participants was in a hospital room---not an ideal environment, but the situation provided lots of time with family members. I strove to keep the interviews relaxed and comfortable. Since the family had to discard all belongings-including photographs and other possible artifacts---before escaping Cambodia, document analysis of firsthand sources was impossible. To provide context for the interviews, I studied published texts of other survivors and read historical accounts and books regarding Cambodia's genocide and other genocides. When interviewing the parents, the daughters translated in English. I videotaped the interviews so I could later transcribe them. I used a biographic narrative interpretive method ---the most open-ended qualitative interview that involved conducting a "minimalist passive" technique (Leavy, 2011). This method avoided asking preconceived questions that could obscure potential data from surfacing. During the first interview, which lasted about 45-60 minutes, I asked participants to describe their experience while in Cambodia and allowed the participants to speak freely without interruption or questioning on my part. Specifically, I began by stating "tell me what happened in Cambodia." I then let the participant speak, with little or no prodding. Since "oral history thrives on talking, largely by the interviewee" and the "interviewers job is to ask meaningful questions, listen carefully, and suppress the urge to talk" (Ritchie, 2014, p. xiv), I reminded myself to remain quiet, with exception of uttering phrases such as "and then?" or "what happened next?" only when necessary to keep the conversation going. After analysis, I conducted a second, short interview (about 20-30 minutes), where I asked follow-up questions for clarification. For instance, I learned participants continuously referred to the Khmer Rouge army simply as "Pol Pot." Finally, I asked participants to review interview transcripts and sections of the article to ensure accuracy (i.e., member checking).

## **Data Analysis**

To construct meaning from the Li family's stories, I practiced a form of constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965; Glaser, & Strauss, 1967), a process that involves reducing data through constant thematic coding. While there is no clear agreement about the definition of thematic coding and how to do it (see Attride-Stirling, 2001) I decided upon a six-phase process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), to identify, analyze and report patterns in data. During the first phase, I gained familiarity with the data by transcribing it verbatim then reading and re-reading the transcriptions. Concurrently, I jotted notes of anything that struck my interest or appeared significant. During the next phase, I worked systematically through the data, giving "full and equal attention to each data item" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 18) as I began to assign initial codes to extracts of data (i.e., words, phrases, sentences). From there, I searched for themes within the coded data, building a list, then refined those themes by checking the coded data extracts against each theme, looking for coherent patterns; I eliminated those themes failing to meet this criterion. Next, I defined each remaining theme by naming it and writing a detailed description. With clearly defined themes, I positioned myself for the final phase, writing up the report.

## **The Family's Stories**

Based on thematic coding, I developed five themes from the family's stories. Each family member experienced these themes to some degree. The five themes were: living a harsh existence, living in a constant state of fear, continuous exposure to death and suffering, following orders from the ruling group without questioning or complaint, and gaining support and help from community members.

### **Harsh Existence**

All family members experienced a harsh, Spartan-like experience, one plagued with hard physical labor, little food, no recreation, and lack of basic healthcare. They had little or no possessions and often had to hide or steal food to survive. Family members worked long hours for no pay and slept on bamboo mats in makeshift tents, surrounded by other workers. Life, for both children and adults, was hard and unforgiving. No recreation, hardly any rest. Just work. Some, like Dai Li, were constantly moved around from one menial job to another:

I worked in the rice field, holding a pole while the cow pulled it. After that, they sent me back home to cook in a kitchen for the workers, chopping wood and carrying dirt. I worked for two or three months then they told me to go cut long grass. I did that for three weeks. After that, they sent me to push rice stalks down for cutting. I did that for over a month. And then back to farming, vegetables, tobacco, for almost a year. I went back to working in the rice field again for over a month. In my spare time, I tried cheating by searching for food for the family at home. I would make a trap to catch fish. I got caught with the fish hook and got sick with an infection. I went to the hospital for three weeks.

Others, like Hu Yin Li, who helped build the infamous Koh Sla Dam, were forced to work in one location. It was not uncommon for the children to work 10 to 12 hours a day. Despite hours of physical labor, they were malnourished. Food, at least more substantial selections such as meat or other proteins, became a luxury rather than a necessity.

*Hu Yin Li*

All day, every day you had to dig the dirt and put it up. Dawn to dusk. No break. Slow down a lit bit that was about it. We ate rice soup, a big old pot like this, and just a little cup of rice and just broth with salt. Maybe once a year you'd get fish, a little tiny bit, just a flavor and that was it and then some vegetables so we'd survive. They have a lot, they planted a lot of rice, but they don't let us eat rice.

The Khmer Rouge's practice of rationing and redistributing food caused the family to resort to stealing and what some might view as deceit (hiding or hoarding items).

*Chao-xing Li*

We mostly ate rice soup. It was mostly water, a few teaspoons of rice. Everyone worked from sunrise to sunset without pay. I sewed in the kitchen, making clothes for the soldiers. My husband worked on the farm, planting rice and vegetables. Often, there was very little to eat. Sometimes, we would grow vegetables without permission and hide the food. The Pol Pot would take food away to give to others.

**Constant State of Fear**

The family, particularly the females, lived in a constant state of fear. From hour to hour, day to day, they never knew whether they would remain alive. They faced being beaten, jailed, or killed by Khmer Rouge soldiers. They watched as family members and friends were hauled away, some never to be seen again. Even when they crossed the border from Cambodia to Thailand, they did not feel safe. They were threatened by bandits and Thai soldiers.

*Chao-xing Li*

At the border, we had to pay men to bring us to Thailand. A necklace, a ring, whatever, they would take it. They had scissors and knives—to make sure you pay them. Then, you were on your own...Even in Thailand, we were not safe. The women slept in between the men so they wouldn't be taken away and raped by the Thai soldiers. They had to be accompanied by the men when gathering food or firewood.

The children who escaped the work camps described high levels of fear, the kind one experiences when facing life and death situations. They spoke of the fear of being beaten or killed if they were caught fleeing or hiding in their parents' home. The terrain also presented other dangers. Lien Hua Yin Li, only eight-years-old at the time, ran from the camp into the darkness after being told her parents were planning to leave their home and flee Cambodia.

The biggest problem, I was escaping at nighttime, I was afraid I was going to drown because I had to cross the ditch, and I don't know how to swim.

## Death and Suffering

With a third of the country's population dying from the hands of the Khmer Rouge, disease and starvation, images of death, pain, and suffering became commonplace for the family. The family lost several relatives during the genocide—including one immediate family member.

*Chao-xing Li*

One of my daughters died at eight from the measles. There was no medical treatment. She was very smart. She would sneak away and come back with food. She would hide food in the rice husks.

Even the younger siblings in the family stared down death, the memories sketched strongly in their minds.

*Lien Hua Yin Li*

In daytime, you go walking, you see people dying on the street...A truck full of people, we had to go through this jungle with whatever we got, I remember hearing in the jungle, noises, pain, moaning pain. I think at that camp, one of my uncles passed away. He was sick.

### Following Orders without Complaint

All family members expressed the importance—the absolute necessity-- of following orders issued by the Khmer Rouge and doing what was asked without complaint. While in the presence of the Khmer Rouge soldiers, they never questioned commands or spoke back. They did what they were told. They also learned the devastating effect of gossiping or slandering the new regime.

*Chao-xing Li*

We moved to the area in 1966, from a different area in northwest Cambodia. The Pol Pot came and placed people in work camps. Some were taken away. We were warned not to discuss the past, or how things were, or you would be taken away or even killed on the spot. One man, a teacher, kept talking about how things use to be, and he was warned. Later, he was told to make fertilizer using human feces and was forced to eat it.

The children witnessed firsthand what happened to those who broke rank. They learned quickly to follow suit and forget about breaking the rules.

**Lia Hua Yin Li**

They put you in a different camp for different ages; it would maybe take afternoon get back home. Kids were eight to ten years old. They make you go to work. I would be out there on the rice field, You either go plant the rice, cut the grains, or dig the ditches. You have a role. Your role is to do different jobs...You are not allowed to go visit your parents or family. If you do get



caught, you'll be punished. The punishment is they make other kids watch-- you take off your shirt and crawl over the rocks. I remember watching that. I was smart enough to do what needed to be done. I didn't make waves.

### **Social Support/Help from Others**

Both daughters escaped the work camps with the help of others, non-family members, who came to their aid. They credited these community members, some unfamiliar, with saving their lives and helping them to reunite with their family. In the case of Hu Yin Li, she benefited from joining a group of girls who hatched a plan to escape the camp.

One day this poor girl wrote a letter, a fake letter, that we were allowed to come home. And I heard they were taking the girl over there, but they didn't advise me. I think one Thai girl, one Cambodian; I'm the only Chinese there. We all left at the same time. One girl, I was lucky, didn't make it. So I was the fourth person. I guess she... I don't know what happened... Four, if all of them came it would be five—that's why they said for me not to go. We walk on this thing about this big. And at nighttime, it's dark. The water is on the left, water on the right. We could not see but we had to hurry, hurry hurry! We fell down in the water, get up and go in, by the time you pass it, you hit the jungle. The jungle has the bamboo, the little small one, not the big one. And the wolf crying. You just try and go, go as fast as you can go. Walk on through the branches, anything. Just go, go! Finally, we went half a day, probably the village somewhere and asked them for food. We gave the letter, fake letter, so we can eat. So we got some food over there so we can eat. Finally, we got home.

Lia Hua Yin Li, on the other hand, was aided by adults, who she said she didn't know personally. She said these strangers guided her to safety.

Somebody told me-- I don't remember if they know me-- they told me I had to leave that camp If I wanted to see my family again. I had to leave. So I escaped that camp. And I was told not to ask people where you going. If you ask that means your escaping from somewhere. You're not local. So I would walk, no food, or anything, walking through a road, quiet. You can hear people doing the farming with the water buffaloes, stuff like that. It took me a whole day by the time I got where my mom and dad were They already left the town. Someone told me to go a certain direction to find them. That night, if I didn't get to them, I would never find them because that night they had to move.

### **Limitations**

Before commenting on the above themes and suggesting implications, as a researcher, I feel it's prudent to address limitations within my research. First, these are my interpretations and not the only interpretations that can be made (Clough, 2002). My perceptions of the family members' stories are subject to my experience and limited knowledge of the family's culture and language. The language barrier presented another limitation since the stories could have been misconstrued through interpreters and me; I attempted to bridge this gap by reading the literature on the subject and understanding the historical and cultural context.

This provided me with a “backdrop,” in which to compare what the participants experienced with that of other survivors’ stories and reports about the conditions of the time period. In addition, these stories are only representative of four survivors of the Khmer Rouge; there are other stories that survivors might tell.

### **Learning from the Family’s Story**

Over the years, social scientists have been intrigued by human beings’ ability to endure under extreme conditions (Wilson, Kahana, & Harel, 1988). The idea of resilience, or as Rutter (1987) defined as a “positive pole of individual differences in people’s responses to stress and adversity,” had been widely reported in connection to post traumatic stress disorder. Childhood traits related to resilience include openness to others, the ability to build relationships, and the ability to participate in community life (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984). In regards to personality traits, genocide survivors emphasized the role of optimism, social support, interpersonal contacts, and a sense that the situation was manageable, even under extreme circumstances, to explain their ability to survive (Kahana, Kahana, Harel, Kelly, Monaghan, & Holland, 1997).

While it can serve as an obstacle in recovery, survivors of the Rwandan genocide drew on personal and private experiences of faith, as well as faith from public and institutions (Fox, 2012). Like other genocides survivors who have attributed their survival to chance or luck (Kahana, Kahana, Harel, Kelly, Monaghan, & Holland, 1997), two of the family members credited luck with helping them to survive. Nevertheless, we should examine their stories closer to learn possible lessons from their hardships. Certainly, help from strangers could be considered part of that good fortune, but other genocide survivors have had similar experiences. Mass violence, such as genocide, disrupts normal social networks; social support can help individuals through trying times and provide a sense of security and belonging (Hardi, 2011). Hardi (2011) found that survivors of the Anfal genocide in Kurdistan-Iraq reported being helped by community members, in some cases, complete strangers. Closer examination suggests that the family learned to exist with little sustenance and adapted to the many challenges presented. Also, the family’s obedience to authority could have contributed to its survival. Rather than see as cowardice, the ability to remain subservient can be viewed as a strategic move, an act of intelligence. Those involved in the Holodomor genocide of Ukraine, for instance, described a “fear to take action.” These survivors feared to oppose or openly challenge, or speak out against, the authority or government. This submission was seen as a means to remain safe and avoid death (Bezo & Maggi, 2015). Perhaps the family members’ reaction to the constant fear and suffering also made them stronger and more focused. Fear can be a positive emotion through learning and experience, and it can make one feel alert and alive (Bantinaki, 2012). Hence, when it was time to act (for instance, when the family members learned they made the “kill list”), the family acted swiftly and decisively and did not let fear stop them.

While many texts regarding Cambodia’s genocide focus on the mass killings, the structured violence, the political intentions behind the Khmer Rouge or the criminal trials (see Kiernan, 2008; Maguire, 2005), this research helped fill in the historical record of this horrendous event by providing firsthand accounts of the family’s experiences. Furthermore, the telling of their stories shed light on how these genocide victims survived this ordeal; what situations did they avoid? What actions did they take? When did they take those actions? What kind of help did they receive? The answers to these questions contribute to our understanding of what it takes to stay alive—even under the direst circumstances. In the end, the family endured and played along so to speak, until they saw opportunity to escape the horrible conditions. Then, they exercised the courage to act. The family members managed to

stay together, making decisions as they faced each challenge, each fork in the road, and almost miraculously, survived to tell their stories.

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In memory of Dai "Gung" Li, a great father and man of quiet strength (October 1931-October 2015).

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