Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge

Khmer Rouge was a Cambodian Communist movement. The Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. It sought to turn Cambodia into a Communist state based on peasant society. Pol Pot led the group for much of its existence. Over 1 1/2 million people were killed or died of mistreatment under the Khmer Rouge.

Khmer is the name of the people of Cambodia. Rouge is the French word for red. Red is often associated with Communism. A group of Cambodian Communists founded the Khmer Rouge in the 1950's. In the 1960's, Pol Pot organized the group to fight Cambodia’s government. In 1975, Khmer Rouge troops captured Phnom Penh, the nation’s capital. The Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia. The new government renamed the country Democratic Kampuchea. Pol Pot served as the secretary-general of the Communist Party of Kampuchea. In 1976, he became the country’s prime minister.

The Khmer Rouge sought to change the country into a classless state. It abolished banks, currency, foreign trade, and private property. It outlawed all religions. The regime forced millions of city dwellers to move to work camps in the countryside. The Khmer Rouge enforced its rule by executions, torture, and other forms of terror.

In 1979, Vietnamese troops and Cambodian groups opposed to the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh. Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge troops fled into the jungles of northern Cambodia. Throughout the 1980's, the Khmer Rouge carried on guerrilla warfare against the new government that the Vietnamese had installed.

In 1989, Vietnam completed the withdrawal of its military forces from Kampuchea. The country then resumed the name Cambodia. In 1990, the Khmer Rouge took part in peace negotiations with the Vietnamese-backed government and two non-Communist groups. In 1991, it signed a cease-fire agreement. But some Khmer Rouge groups rejected the agreement and continued fighting. The Khmer Rouge gradually weakened. Opposing factions split from it. Many of its members defected to the government. In 1997, one of the factions captured Pol Pot. He died in its custody in 1998. By 1999, the Khmer Rouge movement came to an end. In 2004, Cambodia's National Assembly approved the creation of a special international court to try surviving Khmer Rouge leaders. The first Khmer Rouge leader to stand trial was Kaing Guek Eav, who had run a prison where an estimated 17,000 people died. In 2010, he was convicted of war crimes, crimes against humanity, murder, and torture. In 2012, he was sentenced to life in prison.

Source: http://www.worldbookonline.com/student/article?id=ar749751&st=khmer+rouge
Cambodian brings story of genocide to younger audience

By Joseph P. Kahn

Beginning at age 11, Arn Chorn-Pond experienced firsthand the worst atrocities of Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge regime. Taken to a work camp, where his talent for playing the flute helped keep him alive, Chorn-Pond witnessed torture, starvation, mass murder, and cannibalism.

He was later rescued from a Thai refugee camp and brought to America by the Rev. Peter Pond, a New Hampshire clergyman, whose family adopted him. Chorn-Pond went on to graduate from Providence College, live in Lowell, and work against gang violence.

Now a thinly fictionalized biography of Chorn-Pond and his escape from Cambodia’s Killing Fields is among five finalists for this year’s National Book Awards in the young people’s literature category. “Never Fall Down,” written by Patricia McCormick, packs an emotional punch whose impact has surprised even Chorn-Pond.

“I didn’t think American kids would care about what happened to my family and my country,” he said during a recent visit to the Boston area. “They’re busy going to the mall, the club. But I was wrong.”
Arn Chorn-Pond greeted family friend US District Court Chief Judge Mark L. Wolf.

Today, Chorn-Pond, 48, lives in Cambodia running an organization that supports and promotes native artists and musicians. Internationally, he has become a symbol of courage, resilience, and reconciliation as his country continues to heal from genocide’s wounds. The Khmer Rouge regime killed an estimated 2 million of his countrymen in the 1970s.

He returned to Boston to see old friends and to speak with high school students. “Never Fall Down” — the title refers to his knowledge that any stumble in the fields of the Cambodian camp where he toiled would mean instant death — has influenced his work and life in significant ways, according to Chorn-Pond.

It has brought his story, previously told in newspaper articles and the documentary film “The Flute Player,” to a larger, younger audience for whom the events described are in the distant past. McCormick spent months interviewing Chorn-Pond and traveled to rural areas of Cambodia, seeking others who could corroborate, and sometimes add to, what he remembered of his childhood.

Appearing together in New Bedford last month, author and subject spoke to a group of teens who, when they hear about genocide, are more likely to think about what happened in the Holocaust during World War II or in Rwanda in the 1990s — and not what happened in Cambodia four decades ago.

At times Chorn-Pond found it difficult to tell his story, vividly remembering some details — like the sound of a land mine detonating underneath a young girl — and others more vaguely, one factor in McCormick’s decision to novelize the tale. But any difficulties in gathering the material were minor compared with his generosity of spirit.

“Arn’s belief in the power of forgiveness is amazing,” says McCormick, who already knows of two schools, in New York and Connecticut, that have incorporated “Never Fall Down” into their lesson programs. “And when he speaks about the way music saved his life, it’s incredibly moving.”

The book’s publication has also aided Chorn-Pond’s own emotional healing, he says, a process that continues to this day as he grapples with survivor’s guilt and other symptoms of posttraumatic stress.

The novel helps explain why, recounting a litany of horrors that any young reader will find difficult to wade through. In one scene, Chorn-Pond describes undressing other children moments before they are killed by their captors with ax blows to their heads.

“You not living. And you not dead,” Chorn-Pond observes at one point in the book “You living dead.”

Even the novel’s final chapters, after he has come to America, bring little in the way of a happy ending. Cruelly teased by schoolmates for his mannerisms and skin color, he describes the trouble he had controlling his pent-up anger, to the point where he considered running away from his adopted home or killing himself. Only in 1984, when he began to speak publicly about his experiences, including fighting alongside the Khmer Rouge and committing atrocities of his own, did Chorn-Pond begin to heal.

Pol Pot Ruled Cambodia During the Killing Fields

Mass murderers from the 20th century

The men depicted here are among the most notorious killers from the last century. But what do you know of the least known Saloth Sar a.k.a. Pol-Pot?

54,0 Million deaths

30,0 Million deaths

20,0 Million deaths

2,5 Million deaths

Source: http://www.mediaexpression.nl/portfolio_materiaal/graphic/infographic_genocide.jpg
“Never Fall Down” is a biography of Chorn-Pond and his escape from Cambodia’s Killing Fields.

Chorn-Pond sat for an interview in the offices of US District Court Chief Judge Mark Wolf, a close family friend. He and Wolf met 20 years ago, through Wolf’s work with worldwide refugee organizations. While in Lowell, Chorn-Pond and Matthew Wolf, the judge’s son, helped launch Light of Cambodian Children, an educational and advocacy organization serving the city’s large Cambodian-American population.

Wolf stays in close touch with Chorn-Pond — “my other son,” judge Wolf calls him — and says Chorn-Pond’s willingness to share his story has global importance, beyond what it means in terms of its personal therapeutic value.

“In my experience, Jewish Holocaust survivors will talk about what happened, but Cambodian survivors are remarkably unwilling to,” said Wolf, who has helped sponsor a photo exhibit of Cambodian war refugees on display at the John Joseph Moakley United States Courthouse. “This book gives a generation of Cambodian-Americans their story, in a way they probably have not heard from their parents.”
Many young people who have read the book or hear him speak react by openly weeping, Chorn-Pond says, a response that allows him to grieve — again — for all he has seen, done, and lost. Nightmares, headaches, and stomach ulcers are part of that legacy, he adds, calling his guilt “the tiger in my heart” that he must tame.

A slightly built man with soft brown eyes, Chorn-Pond noted that many young Cambodian-Americans whose families survived the Khmer Rouge have drifted into gang activity, or worse, as they have struggled to assimilate into a different culture. He saw the human cost firsthand in his work as youth program coordinator for Lowell’s Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association, where his work focused on gang members and antiviolence initiatives.

“That’s why I think this story could help, not only American children but their parents, too,” Chorn-Pond reflected. “And not just Cambodian refugees but refugees from other countries” who want to share their stories “before they die.”

His humanitarian work has earned Chorn-Pond numerous honors, including a Reebok Human Rights Award and Kohl Foundation International Peace Prize. He counts among his friends and supporters Jimmy Carter, Nelson Mandela, Bruce Springsteen, and Peter Gabriel.

Yet his greatest pleasure, he says, is finding and nurturing young musicians who are reclaiming a part of his homeland’s heritage.

Ten years ago, Chorn-Pond left Lowell and moved back to Cambodia, building himself a house outside Phnom Penh on land donated to him. In that house live eight orphaned Cambodian children whom he is training as musicians and musical ambassadors and taking them to remote areas of the country — still dangerous travel, due to land mines and other threats — to give free concerts.

Why is music so important? Because, according to Chorn-Pond, 90 percent of the artists and musicians alive in Cambodia in the 1970s were targeted for murder. His family owned an opera company, one reason they were driven from their village by soldiers and dispersed to the countryside, where most of his relatives either vanished or perished.

Back then, it was his ability to play the flute that helped keep Chorn-Pond alive. Today, he says, Cambodian children enter a world that would have no music unless efforts were made to preserve it. That’s the mission of Cambodian Living Arts, an organization he founded in 1998.

“If nothing else,” he said, “at least they’ll have music in their lives.”
Click this link to see an interview with Patricia McCormick and Arn Chorn-Pond:

http://cleanvideosearch.com/media/action/yt/watch?videoid=L-A_Y1kjJww

Click this link to hear Patricia McCormick reading from the book at the National Book Awards ceremony:

http://cleanvideosearch.com/media/action/yt/watch?videoid=LjLT5SVO0Q

Click this link to read OR listen to a news story about *Never Fall Down*.

http://www.npr.org/2012/05/19/153010795/never-fall-down-surviving-the-killing-fields

**A Former Cambodian Child Soldier Now Making Life Safer for Others**

August 13, 2010 by ablaney

Maneuvering slowly through grassy Cambodian terrain, a caravan of 20 men and women is on a search-and-rescue mission. Dressed in military fatigues, they are guided
by a fearless leader who calculates every step and ensures the safest path for his comrades.

It takes just minutes for the unit to confront the first of many hidden targets: a muddied 20-year-old land mine buried a few inches beneath the ground.

“This is an active land mine made from Russia. [If] we step on [it] … it explodes and cuts the leg off,” says Aki Ra, leader of the Cambodian Self Help Demining team. He and his group are working to make their country safer by clearing land mines — many of which Aki Ra planted himself years ago.

Aki Ra, a Cambodian native who does not recall his birth year, was a child soldier during the communist Khmer Rouge regime, a genocidal crusade responsible for the deaths of an estimated 1.5 million Cambodians during the 1970s. He was raised by the army after being separated from his family during the internal conflict.

Around age 10, Aki Ra estimates, he was given a rifle that measured his own height. Soon after, he was taught to lay land mines.

For three years, Aki Ra worked as a mine layer for the Khmer Rouge. He then did the same job for the Vietnamese army that overthrew his village.

“I maybe planted 4,000 to 5,000 land mines in a [single] month,” said Aki Ra, who says he’s about 40 years old now. “We planted them all over the place.”

Watch a slideshow of the some young landmine victims whom Aki Ra has helped.

According to the Cambodian Mine Action and Victim Assistance Authority, an estimated 4 million to 6 million land mines were laid in Cambodia during three decades of conflict. The mines were planted to defend strategic military locations, target warring opponents and deny the use of roads.

“I had [bad] feelings, because sometimes we were fighting against our friends and relatives,” Aki Ra said. “I felt sad when I saw a lot of people were killed. A lot of people were suffering from land mines. [But] I did not know what to do, [because] we were under orders.”

Approximately 63,000 civilians and soldiers have been in accidents involving land mines and other explosive weapons, according to the Cambodian Mine Victim Information
System. Nearly 19,000 of them were killed. Today, Cambodia reportedly has one amputee for every 290 people, one of the highest ratios in the world.

When the United Nations came in the early 1990s to help restore peace to Cambodia, Aki Ra saw an opportunity to begin undoing the damage he and others had done. He started training with the U.N. and helping them clear mines.

It was around this time he got the name he goes by today. He was born Eoun Yeak, but he was so skilled at clearing mines that his supervisors began comparing him to AKIRA, a heavy-duty appliance company in Japan. One reportedly commented, “He works just like an AKIRA.” The name stuck.

Aki Ra estimates that he and his group have cleared more than 50,000 land mines and unexploded weapons.

In 1993, one year after working with the U.N., Aki Ra decided to begin clearing mines alone.

“Some of the areas I was clearing were places where I used to plant mines before,” he said. “I didn't have any equipment. … I clear by knife, by stick.”

For Aki Ra, this bare-hands technique “wasn’t dangerous. It was
easy.”

But easy didn’t mean legal. The method was not in accordance with international standards, which requires protective gear and other professional equipment. So in 2005, he went to the United Kingdom to receive formal training and accreditation.

In 2008, Aki Ra formed his nonprofit demining organization. Comprised of native Cambodians, it includes former soldiers and war crime victims. One of the workers is an amputee who lost a leg to a land mine.

“[Our] goal is to clear land mines in rural villages for the people who need the land for building houses or farming or building schools,” Aki Ra said.

Aki Ra and his organization devote all of their donated funds to clearing Cambodia’s rural “low-priority” villages. These villages, populated primarily by poor farmers, do not always receive first dibs for minefield clearance projects because of their remoteness and limited traffic. At times, they’re completely overlooked.

“Villagers report land mines every day, and they ask us to destroy [them],” Aki Ra said. “The people are afraid of mines. Whether there are a lot of land mines or only a few, [we] still have to clear the area so that the people in the village can be safe.”

Kuot Visoth, chief of Prey Thom village, was relieved when the team arrived in early July to clear his village.


“I know the area around the school has a lot of land mines, and I am afraid that when the children come to school and play, they will step on them, or the villagers’ buffaloes grazing in the area would be killed,” Visoth said.
Aki Ra estimates that he and his group have cleared more than 50,000 land mines and unexploded war weapons such as bombs and grenades. The Cambodian government says there are 3 million to 5 million mines still undiscovered.

Many of Aki Ra’s recovered land mines and unexploded weapons are on display at a museum in Siem Reap. For $2, visitors can touch defused mines and bombs as well as AK-47 rifles and war uniforms.

“I had an idea to open a land mine museum to teach people to understand about war, land mines,” he said. “Even though the war [is] finished, [these explosives] still kill people, and the land cannot be used.”

Also at the museum is an orphanage that Aki Ra and his wife, Hourt, opened about a decade ago. Roughly 100 children, some injured by land mines, have been cared for over the years. The orphanage provides food and shelter for the children and sends them to public school.

“I brought them to the museum because I could provide them with [a] better situation,” Aki Ra said. “If I didn’t help them, they would have a very difficult life.”

The orphanage’s first resident, Sot “Tol” Visay, lost a leg to a mine. He was living on the street when Aki Ra was demining in his province. Aki Ra offered Visay a home, and Visay has spent the past seven years living there.

“This place has been very good to me,” said Visay, now 21. “Mr. Aki Ra does not want anything from me. Instead, he encourages all people here to study, to gain knowledge.” Hourt died last year from a stroke, leaving Aki Ra to care for his three biological children and 27 orphans ages 10 to 20. Aki Ra is thankful to have caretakers, teachers, a chef and a driver who help look after the children during his demining missions, which can last up to 25 consecutive days every month.

“All the children living in my center I consider as my own children. They call me father,” said Aki Ra, whose efforts in Cambodia will be highlighted in an upcoming documentary, “A Perfect Soldier.” “I have told them about my personal life. They understand all about my history. I tell the children that they should study hard, do good acts and love each other.”

Click this link to go to the Adopt-a-Minefield website – read the info and watch the video:

http://www.landmines.org/programs/cambodia/index.cfm

Click this link to see the slideshow at the Cambodia Landmine Museum:

http://www.cambodialandminemuseum.org/

Click this link to watch a short video on child soldiers in Cambodia:

(feel free to stop at the end when the donation information comes on)