

Sotheara Phan, a Refugee from Cambodia, Recounts Her Journey from a War Torn Homeland to a New Life in the United States

Sotheara Phan, a petite and beautiful young woman, flew from Phoenix, Arizona to New York City with her husband and two small children in order to tell her story—through a series of back-to-back interviews over a long and intense weekend—while also squeezing in a visit with her younger sister, Sopheak, who lives in the city.

Sotheara arrived in the United States with her mother and three siblings when she was 18 years old, after years living in a refugee camp in Thailand. Sotheara and her family are Cambodian. During the earlier parts of Sotheara's life, her family struggled in their home country simply to survive during the genocidal rule of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. Sotheara lost her father, and then one of her brothers, and then her step-father, in that struggle.

In addition to these beloved members of her own family, one million other Cambodians—out of a total population of eight million—died from executions, overwork, starvation and disease under Pol Pot's rule. Estimates of civilians murdered outright by the Khmer Rouge regime range from approximately one to three million, and the Khmer Rouge's Killing Fields are as notorious as Auschwitz in the history of mass killing.

After being forced to abandon their home in the city and march hundreds of miles to rural work projects, and to live for years in abject poverty in the countryside along with millions of others, Sotheara and the other surviving members of her family finally attempted a flight to freedom, across the border into a refugee camp in Thailand.

A Terrifying Journey from Cambodia to Thailand

Sotheara will never forget that terrifying journey. Guides led Sotheara and other family members from a wretched camp near the border of Cambodia, during the dark of night, through treacherous mountain passes, to a refugee camp just across the border in Thailand.

Sotheara's younger sister, Sopheak, was just a baby at the time. After carrying Sopheak for many hours through the mountainous terrain separating Cambodia from Thailand, Sotheara's mother, who was pregnant at the time, grew so weary at one point that she had to ask one of the men traveling with the

group to help carry her sleeping infant. When Sotheara's baby sister woke unexpectedly a short time later, however, and saw that a strange man was carrying her, she began to wail in terror:

And she cried really loud. We got so scared. The guide tried to close her mouth, so she wouldn't be able to cry so loud. But she squirmed fiercely, trying to get out from the man and continued crying. The more noise she made, the more scared we became. The whole group just thought we would all get killed because she was crying so loud. We waited until my mom hurried to get her and that took at least maybe two, three minutes.

But what saved us was the direction the wind was blowing. The wind blew the sound away so that the border patrol and other roaming thieves could not hear. So my mom hurried to get close to her, to grab her, to hug her, feed her. My sister felt more comfortable in my mother's arms and finally stopped crying.

Then we all stopped right there, and the guide told my mom, "You know, your daughter can cost everybody their life. So we cannot take you with us any further. You have to stay here with one guide who will bring you later." They wanted the big group to go first, and for my mom, my sister and another to stay and follow behind later. This is so that if anything were to happen, the whole group would not be endangered. My mom had little choice but to stay behind. She knew that this was our problem. She didn't want to cost other people their lives so she agreed. She understood, let the rest of the group go ahead and she waited to go later.

In the meantime, the sun was about to rise, threatening their protective cover of darkness. Everyone in the group was desperate to move quickly in order to safely reach their final destination in the refugee camp across the border in Thailand.

My mom told me to go with the group. I then said, "If you don't go mom, I won't go either. If somehow they got caught, we would all get killed together." I would be happier that way than to leave my mom behind.

Even though my mom told me to go, I just could not. I told my mom that if we go anywhere, we have to go together. My mom kept telling me to go, that if anything happens, just let it happen to her and my sister. But I could not stand the thought of losing them. So I told her I would rather stay too. I kept telling her, "No, no." I was at that time nine or ten years old. Although she was urging me to go ahead, I kept saying, "No, I cannot go. Let them go, I'll stay with you, at least we all be together, die together."

Sotheara, Her Mother and Sister Make It to the Camp—Through an Underground Sewage Pipe

The guide who remained behind to accompany Sotheara, her mother and her baby sister was gruff and impatient. His own life was at risk. He knew that any of the armed Thai soldiers, patrolling the border and the tall barbed wire fence surrounding their refugee camp destination, would follow instructions to shoot on sight any refugee or smuggler attempting to approach the border or the camp.

At one point, after finally arriving at a bluff overlooking the refugee camp in Thailand and after the sun had risen and people could be clearly seen walking below, the guide ordered Sotheara and her mother and baby sister to remain behind while he went ahead to find a safe way to try to enter the camp. After he failed to return within a half an hour, Sotheara and her mother became certain that he had run away or been apprehended. Sotheara and her mother both understood that they were abandoned and alone:

We thought that he left us because of my sister. She was so young, and he didn't want to risk his life on her. We thought that he abandoned us. That's was my mom's biggest worry. She kept saying, "What's going on, how come he never come back? What are we going to do?" We both got so worried.

It was fully light now. They could see the armed guards patrolling the fence around the camp directly below their perch on the bluff. The baby would wake again soon, hungry. Her cries would not escape the attention of the guards below. They faced imminent capture and death.

Miraculously, however, the guide returned for them after all. Having scoped out the situation, he offered them two choices. They could try to remain undetected where they were—hidden in a forested area on a mountainside right above the refugee camp—until they came up with an alternative plan, even though they had no food, no water, no protection or shelter, and an infant who could not be kept silenced. Or, they could leave immediately and follow the guide down to the opening of a sewage tunnel a little further below, that ran directly under the road manned by the armed guards and under the barbed wire fence, and into the refugee camp. The guide warned them that the tunnel was filled with sewage, and because it was also very narrow they would have to crawl to get through it, and that the patrolling Thai soldiers would hear any noise made by them. The decision that Sotheara's mother was forced to make was terrifying:

And my mom had to think. If we go into the mountains, we would need food. And we didn't bring any food at all, just a little bit of water. Also, my sister was so young that I didn't know how long she would last without food. We didn't even know if we would need to stay in the mountains one day, two days or

three days. In the mountains, you might encounter different people, different dangers. So we didn't know, there could be so many problems. You had to make a decision quickly, too, because we had to move now. People, including the soldiers, were starting to wake up.

Sotheara's mother chose to go through the sewage tunnel. Their treacherous passage through that foul escape route remains the scariest time of Sotheara's life.

When Sotheara and her mother and baby sister finally emerged out from the other end, they found themselves—of all places—in a pig sty. Literally—surrounded by four or five big, squealing pigs, angry to be woken. Sotheara and her mother ran, as fast as they could, away from the pigs, who threatened to notify everyone in the camp of their presence.

We tried to run from there fast as we could, so that the pigs would calm down and then didn't wake everyone up... We thought that everything could be ruined right there. We were very scared and didn't know what would happen here. But when we got inside the refugee camp, we would feel much safer because at least we were away from the soldiers.

Life in the Camp Proves Risky, Too

Although Sotheara and her mother and siblings risked everything to get to this refugee camp in Thailand, it was hardly a safe haven. The camp, filled to capacity, had long been officially closed to newly arrived refugees. The Thai government was not pleased that the camp served as a beacon of freedom to lure more Cambodians across the border. The Cambodian government also exerted political pressure to discourage the exodus of its workers. Forced to reside in the camp unregistered, until the next round of registration for newly arrived refugees, Sotheara and her family continued to have to hide. If caught, they risked being deported back to Cambodia, which would mean almost certain death.

With the help of relatives and friends, they were able to find shelter in the camp. Small bamboo huts were available after having been vacated by other refugees seeking resettlement. But as nonregistered residents, Sotheara's family was ineligible for food rations, clothing, education or medical care. Fortunately, an aunt who had already resettled in the United States was able to send them money from time to time, which enabled them to buy food and other essential goods from other refugees in the camp. They managed to scrape by with the help of other refugees who were registered camp residents and eligible for food rations and other assistance. Life was hard, but they were grateful that they were among their own people and far away from the genocidal regime in Cambodia.

Their greatest fears during this time were the occasional camp raids conducted by Thai soldiers, who sought to round up unregistered camp residents for deportation back to Cambodia. The Thai soldiers were notorious for beating, raping and extorting cruel bribes from defenseless Cambodian refugees who resided in the camp, before offering them back up to vindictive government authorities in Cambodia. Sotheara's family was never allowed to forget their murderous impulses:

A lot of people kept moving across the border like us, and just like in our situation, they entered the refugee camp. Some people made it. Others were killed by the Thai soldiers surrounding the camp. We heard a lot of shooting, almost every night. When we heard the gun shots, we would think that people must have gotten killed or hurt. We knew that a lot of people were trying to escape to the refugee camp, because this was the only camp that could help people get out and get to a different country. So, so many people tried to get in. Some people made it like us, some people did not make it and got caught by Thai soldiers and some of them were taken back. Some of the Thai soldiers were very cruel, they just killed you right there. So, anything could happen.

Sotheara's family, like other unregistered refugees, dug narrow crawl spaces in the earthen floors beneath cooking fire sites in their huts. More than once, alerted that a raid was imminent, they risked suffocation while hiding in these airless and incredibly cramped slivers of space for hours at a time. During one raid, some refugees also hid from Thai soldiers by climbing atop the roof of a camp church.

Sotheara's mother gave birth to her youngest son shortly after the family's arrival in the refugee camp. But chronic malnutrition and the stress of the family's displacement had taken a toll on Sotheara's mother, and she was unable to produce any milk to nurse her newborn. Sotheara remembers her infant brother crying ceaselessly from hunger. Sotheara was terrified that he might die. Her mother was too weak even to walk.

Sotheara's tiny brother's incessant howling from thirst and hunger again put the family in jeopardy—but then, more frightening still, he grew limp and weak and quiet.

Sotheara alone was responsible for keeping her baby brother alive. She saved her brother's life by carrying him—all alone and in the middle of the night—to the hut of a refugee woman living nearby who recently had given birth to a baby of her own and was willing to put Sotheara's brother to her breast after her own baby had been fed and was sleeping. As a registered resident of the camp, this woman had regular access to food and health care, and was fit enough to be able to nurse her own child without

difficulty. When she saw that Sotheara's mother was unable to produce any milk and that Sotheara's baby brother was starving to death, this kind woman offered to nurse Sotheara's infant brother.

Sotheara was very grateful to this woman for her concern and generosity. But it fell to Sotheara to bring her baby brother to the woman's hut for feeding when he woke up in the middle of the night and cried from hunger. And those trips to the neighbor's hut in the middle of the night were terrifying. Nights were pitch black. There were no street lamps in the camp. Most residents kept their homes dark as well, to conserve candles and kerosene and to avoid unwanted attention. Frequent incidents of robbers and attackers prowling in the camp at night kept most refugees fearful and firmly committed to remaining inside their huts.

It was very, very scary for Sotheara to bundle her howling infant brother into her arms at 1:00, 2:00, even 3:00 in the morning, and then carry him through the dark to her nursing neighbor. Those nightly trips in pitch darkness, carrying a baby who might at any moment rouse camp authorities with his hungry or fearful cry, were the second most terrifying experience in Sotheara's life.

Eventually, the camp began to register new residents and Sotheara and her family were among those in line. They were finally able to receive food rations and medical attention, and were eventually approved to resettle in the United States, reuniting with long-lost family members who were already resettled in Arizona.

Life in Arizona

Today, Sotheara's baby brother and younger sister are college graduates who are pursuing graduate educations. Because Sotheara herself arrived in the United States at an older age—eighteen—more than a decade older than her younger siblings, she did not have the same opportunity to receive a full education. Instead, her family needed her to begin working right away to help support them all.

Sotheara was hard at work in the backroom of a U.S. post office, sorting mail, less than a month after leaving the Thai refugee camp and arriving for resettlement in Arizona. Happily married now to a fellow Cambodian refugee who owns and runs a small successful bakery, and the mother of three small children, Sotheara continues to worry about how to make a living and help support family members still in Cambodia. Even today, when preparing meals, Sotheara is scrupulous never to cook more food than is needed. She feels deep guilt if any left over food is thrown away. Not once can she throw out food without experiencing the searing memory of hunger and fear.

Her younger siblings still worship Sotheara as the strongest and most honorable person they have ever known. They each owe their life to the love and devotion Sotheara gave them at a time when Sotheara was just a child herself. And they are all profoundly grateful to Sotheara's mother as well:

We left Cambodia and we came here, for safety and education for future. When you've been through so much and then you get a chance here, you feel like you need to just work hard on it and get it, that's all. My mother didn't have any material things to give us. She believed that just the opportunity to get an education would enable us to build a better life. Because she is not rich, she did not have any resources from Cambodia to give to her kids. She always just knew that if we are able to come here, her kids would be able to get a good education, a good future. That's what was always on her mind and we all made it here. She has achieved her goal. She made it.

Although Sotheara currently works part time as a realtor and full time caring for the needs of her young family in Arizona, she also longs to help other refugee families who still struggle, and greatly admires her younger sister's efforts to provide assistance to recently arrived refugees in the United States:

Somehow if I could go back to my country, if I ever had the money, I would give back. I'll help especially the people who need help, as much as I can, because I know that feeling of being impoverished. We didn't have anything, except family and other people as support. To the countless people who helped us along the way, we are so thankful and happy. You cannot imagine, you cannot put into words to how happy we were. So that's why I want to help and give back if I get a chance.

My sister started an organization to help other resettled refugees. She did that just because she remembered how difficult it was when we first got here. We would be lost if we didn't have family to help us, to guide us around the schools, to show us where the market was, how to register for the class, all of that. That's why she started her organization—to help new refugees who come in to Arizona from different countries. They help them find contacts and take them around to help them make sure they get settled down and ready to rebuild their lives, to help them figure out all the things they need to start their new lives. I really believe in and support what they are doing.

Life is much better than what we used to know. Things have improved a lot. But there are still poor people. People still cannot get much education, cannot afford to buy food and other things they need. My family is lucky. For some other people, even though they have energy to work, sometimes they cannot find a job to work so their families are living in a very hard situation. It's hard to raise a family.

When I see people struggle and need help, I just feel bad. It makes me think back to when we left from our home country. We didn't have anything. So I just feel that one of these days, if I can help, I will try to help people who are in difficult situations, like our situation. This is because I know that they are going through what we had been through.

Shy by nature, Sotheara struggled very hard to tell her story. It took enormous sacrifice and courage on her part to fly from Arizona to New York City and sit down to talk with a stranger and a tape recorder. Sotheara agreed to undertake this task in the hopes that whoever heard her story would be inspired to help refugees in the United States and around the world, as well.

Lynn Savarese

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