

Film begins.

On-screen text: Khatharya Um

Khatharya: My name is Khatharya Um, and I came to the United States as a refugee in 1975 from Cambodia.

On-screen text: MY CAMBODIA

On-screen text: PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

Khatharya: Each time I come back to Cambodia has always been a different sense of expectation and different sense of feeling about coming home.

I think my first trip back was really motivated by really a deep desire to see if I could locate families and relatives who might still be alive after the Khmer Rouge. But over time I think that proved to be not possible.

On-screen text: The Khmer Rouge was a Cambodian communist political party formed in 1951.

On-screen text: Once in power, the Khmer Rouge systematically tortured and killed its citizens in an effort to “cleanse” and eliminate anyone suspected of capitalist activities.

On-screen text: Approximately two million men, women, and children died from 1975 to 1979.

Khatharya: This is a very old part of Phnom Penh. It used to be a very...not very congested, very clean tree-lined boulevard, and families would come for evening walks. It was like the promenade there, because it's very cool in the evening, and it gets hot in the city.

This is the Royal Palace to your left. And you can see that the pavilion is Chanchhaya, the pavilion where, on certain auspicious days, the royal ballet would be performed.

During the Khmer Rouge, the entire city was evacuated. It was depopulated, two million people being forced out at gunpoint to leave the city. It's April, so we're talking about the height of the hot season. Many of the streets were asphalt, so [there were] children with bare feet walking on there. Because, again, in some parts of the city, you were just told to leave immediately. You were also told that you don't need to take anything with you, because Angkar would provide, and that you would only be relocated a short distance and for a short period of time while they clean up the city. And instead, they never returned.

For the Khmer Rouge, the vision was really a totally transformed Cambodia—what they would call a complete cleansing of it, the return to the purity of the traditional culture, the traditional way of life. Part of that transformation had to do with doing away with classes, so that there is no rich and poor, supposedly. Children belong to the state, and not to the parents. And your loyalty as individuals is to the state, and not to your kin.

On-screen text: Families were separated and forced to work in labor camps.

Khatharya: The stories are everywhere. Every single person—old, young—all have stories to tell. You can read stuff in the books, you can do all of that, but there's nothing that's comparable to the lived experiences of someone who's seen it all—Cambodia at its height of independence and glory and promise, and the darkest era of Cambodian history.

On-screen text:

BOU MENG
KHMER ROUGE SURVIVOR

Khatharya (talking to Bou Meng), translated: I heard that Van Nath passed away.

Bou Meng, translated: Yes, he died. Only me and Mey left.

On-screen text: Bou Meng was one of seven survivors at Tuol Sleng prison when the Khmer Rouge regime fell. Over 17,000 people were imprisoned, tortured, and killed in this prison.

Bou Meng, translated: They beat me and scarred my back. See, I drew pictures. This is my wife. They slit her throat.

Khatharya: This is his wife. This is him when they tortured him.

Bou Meng, translated: They said I was KGB, CIA but I didn't know anything.

On-screen text: Bou Meng was kept alive because of his artistic ability to create life-like portraits of top Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot.

On-screen text: BOU MENG'S PORTRAIT DRAWING OF POL POT

On-screen text: FORMER PRISON WHERE BOU MENG WAS IMPRISONED

Khatharya prays.

Khatharya: We are here at Tuol Sleng Prison, also a torture center, extermination center. This was formerly a high school, Tuol Svay Prey High School, during the pre-Khmer Rouge period. So you can see that these buildings were initially classroom buildings.

This is where the prisoners would be brought in. They would be blindfolded, and then they would be brought here, had their photographs taken, and then the process of torture and extraction of confessions occurred.

They were made to confess to subversive activities, anti-regime activities, and also to plotting for the overthrow of the regime. We know that at least 17,000 were brought here. Sometimes—you see some of the photos—the people still have colorful outfits or patterns. That meant, most likely, that they were killed or they were arrested very soon after the fall of Phnom Penh, because they were still wearing pre-Khmer Rouge outfits. The others, of course, you see [are wearing] very black Khmer Rouge uniforms. No color was allowed to be worn under the Khmer Rouge. Everybody has to have a uniform, bobbed haircut.

On-screen text: PRISONERS WERE FOUND CHAINED TO THE BEDS

On-screen text: PRISON CELL

"The Security of Regulation" sign is shown.

Sign text:

THE SECURITY OF REGULATION

1. *you must answer accordingly to my questions – Don't turn them away.*
2. *Don't try to hide the facts by making pretexts this and that You are strictly prohibited to contest me.*
3. *Don't be fool for you are a chap who dare to thwart the revolution.*
4. *you must immediately answer my questions without wasting time to reflect.*

5. *Don't tell me either about your immoralities or the essence of the revolution.*
6. *While getting lashes or electrification you must not cry at all*
7. *Do nothing, sit still and wait for my orders. If there is no order, keep quiet. When I ask you to do something, you must do it right away without protesting.*
8. *Don't make pretext about Kampuchea Krom in order to hide your secret or traitor.*
9. *If you don't follow all the above rules, you shall get many lashes of electric wire.*
10. *If you disobey any point of my regulations you shall get either ten lashes or five shocks of electric discharge.*

On-screen text: After forcing prisoners to confess, the Khmer Rouge took them to Choeung Ek, one of the country's thousands of killing fields. Here, they were executed.

On-screen text: CHOEUNG EK "KILLING FIELD"

On-screen text: 8,000 BODIES WERE FOUND HERE BURIED IN MASS GRAVES

Sign text: SENILE MALE KAMPUCHEAN OVER 60 YEARS OLD

Sign text: MATURE FEMALE KAMPUCHEAN FROM 40 TO 60 YEARS OLD

Sign text: JUVENILE FEMALE KAMPUCHEAN FROM 15 TO 20 YEARS OLD

Sign text: [Site] 7: MASS GRAVE OF 166 VICTIMS WITH OUT HEADS

Sign text: PIECE OF BONES REMAINING AFTER EXCAVATION IN 1980

Khatharya: So many people we know died here.

Sign text: [Site] 5: MASS GRAVE OF MORE THAN 100 VICTIMS CHILDREN AND WOMEN WHOSE MAJORITY WERE NAKED

Khatharya: They're all violent sites, but this one: women and children. And that's a tree that children were bashed against when they were killed.

Sign text: KILLING TREE AGAINST WHICH EXECUTIONERS BEAT CHILDREN

Sign text: MAGIC TREE. THE TREE WAS USED AS A TOOL TO HANG A LOUDSPEAKER WHICH MAKE SOUND LOUDER TO AVOID THE MOAN OF VICTIMS WHILE THEY WERE BEING EXECUTED

Khatharya: The thing is you're literally stepping on people's graves still. Not all... They're there. And we're walking on them. And these are our families. And now it's a tourist site. I mean... they were given no dignity before, and even in death, they still have to suffer the indignity.

Sign text: [Site] 6: MASS GRAVE OF 450 VICTIMS

Khatharya: Eight thousand remains—skulls—have been unearthed so far. But we know that at Tuol Sleng, S-21, at least 17,000 or more people were brought there. And this is the killing ground. There are 43 more graves that have not been dug up.

The genocide has imprinted itself deep—not just metaphysically, but in the physical aspect of the land itself.

On-screen text: In 1979, a Cambodian force backed by Vietnamese troops overthrew the Khmer Rouge.

On-screen text: During the four-year reign of the Khmer Rouge, about two million Cambodian inhabitants died from disease, starvation, forced labor, imprisonment, and execution.

Khatharya: The first thing that Cambodians did right after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime was to rebuild the temple, to re-ordain monks. All those things were destroyed and prohibited under the Khmer Rouge.

The revival of artistic traditions and cultural reproduction in different forms in Cambodia is important because, during the Khmer Rouge, so much of that was lost, including the death of master artists and artisans. Ours is an orally based tradition. Their passing marked the loss of a very significant chunk of what they had committed to memory. The process of recollection, retrieval, and preservation has presented one of the challenges, for Cambodians both in Cambodia and in the diaspora.

On-screen text: ANGKOR WAT

Khatharya: A great civilization was once here, and not just the killing fields. Cambodia was not just a war, not just the killing fields. Cambodia predated all of that. Cambodia represents both the grandeur of civilization as well as some of the 20th century's darkest moments.

For me, [it's] always a good feeling to be home. There's that sense of warmth inside you about coming back home. But it also evokes such painful memory. It's very difficult for many of us Cambodians. Those memories don't go away. And...I don't know. I think that's the burden we bear. The burden we bear as survivors. But it is important to share the story, because the worst that could happen is that no one remembers this.

On-screen text: KHATHARYA'S FAMILY STUPA

On-screen text: Khatharya fled Cambodia and emigrated to the U.S. in 1975. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, over 600,000 Cambodians seeking food and shelter became refugees throughout the world.

On-screen text: In 2005, a special tribunal was established to put the Khmer Rouge leaders on trial for international war crimes. To date, only three leaders have been convicted of crimes against humanity.

Credits roll.