

To Destroy You Is No Loss (Cambodian Odyssey) by Joan Criddle & Teeda Butt (1987)

The Khmer Rouge [KM] continued the Cambodian genocide from 1975-1979. They were a wealthy middle-class family living in Phnom Penh when the Khmer Rouge soldiers stormed in & evacuated 3 million residents in a matter of three days. The borders were closed & families were told to return to the villages. Few people realized that new government's plans were to brainwash the kids & eventually kill all adults.

They packed their car with food & water, gold [paper money was useless due to hyper-inflation], jewelry, clothes, pots, pans, mats, & 2 sheets of plastic. They pushed the car & only used the engines to climb a hill (no gas stations). The city water was shut-off & soon the young, old & sick were dying. It took a week to travel 10 miles. They were forced to cross rivers & leave cars behind (they cut the spare tire into sandals). Electric appliances were useless in villages without electricity. They had to rid themselves of western influence items (suitcases, clothes, etc). They traded clothes for wood to build a cart & bicycle tires.

The KM burned schools & libraries. They soon realized they would never be the 1st to do anything (people were killed for little infractions) & always fit in. Through fear 50,000 soldiers controlled 8 million people. It was unproductive to turn former farmers into fisherman & visa versa. Most people were forced to work the rice fields. Each family was given a 20'x20' plot & had to build their own 10'x10' bamboo hut.

Everyone wore grey clothes so they wouldn't stand out [& could cause trouble]. Within a few weeks it was illegal to have a private food supply. Athletic games were soon prohibited (if they had energy to play, they weren't working hard enough). They worked the fields from 5:30-11 am and 1-6 pm (everyday) and then had evening indoctrination meetings.

Rice rations were cut to one cup per person per day (400 Calories) in the months before harvest. Most of the new leaders were couldn't read or write & were threatened by those who could. Most educated people were killed, especially doctors. They were constantly told: "To destroy you is no loss." There was no mail & no communication with the outside world.

The KM had the people tear down temples & said the people chose to do this. KM wanted new babies, but most died of malnutrition. They were set to be executed several times, but were miraculously spared each time. KM would trick people into relocated to new villages only to stop the trucks & kill them all. Most of the killings would take place in the rainy season since the soldiers were not at war with Vietnam then.

Nobody had shoes anymore & most clothes were shreds. By 1978 the KM was financially insolvent trying to pay for a war with no income. There was urgency about this harvest. She was married to a distant cousin to keep from being married off to a stranger. Vitou was the village hunter (this gave him a pass to travel) and learned well from the old timers. He also seemed to court danger. Four days after the wedding Phnom Penh fell to the Vietnamese.

People quickly raided the storehouses to regain their strength for the trip. Most headed back to the city, but this family began the slow 200-mile march to Thailand. The borders were not officially open, but people could be smuggled across for gold. It was dangerous & many died. The last 5 miles were stretched into 20 to avoid detection. It had taken them almost 4 months to get there, but they were free. They had ice & sweets for the first time in 4 years. One of her sisters got a sponsor from a church in Davis, CA.

Within a month that one refugee camp had swelled to 40,000. To get the world's attention the Thai government started sending 42,000 back into the jungles of Cambodia. They took what food & water and headed back into hell. The jungles had land-mines. It took 2 months to get back to the Thai border. Some of the men began smuggling bikes & food for a month to earn enough money to smuggle their families back across. One day in the market a lady was asking if anyone heard of this family. She gave him a letter from her sister in USA.

They heard that refugees were no longer being sent back so they tried again. This time it was more dangerous, the guides got lost & they had to hike 50 miles. They were almost dead when they reached the border. They made it, but this time they were sent to prison before verifying the addresses in USA & sent back to a refugee camp for 5 months. A family in Davis decided to sponsor them.

Books: Bamboo & Butterflies (JoAn Criddle)