

# COMMEMORATING THE SHOAH AND THE KILLING FIELDS

## Chivy Sok

I was six years old when the Khmer Rouge invaded my city on April 17, 1975. During that invasion my family and I were forced to relocate into the countryside, basically working as slave laborers for the Khmer Rouge in an organization popularly known as “Angkar”. Every time I try to describe what happened during the Khmer Rouge period I just . . . I sort of pull back and say, “Well what do I say?” So much happened.

If you can just imagine Boston, you know this wonderful city, being completely emptied out. All of a sudden, all of the families have to pull whatever they want to bring with them and are pushed out into the countryside. You’re forced to live in a commune and your entire life revolves around doing agrarian work in order to service the Angkar. Everything that you know as daily life – whether it’s the museums, education, your financial market, the newspaper, modern buildings – everything that mattered to you as part of your regular life is completely discarded. You, as an individual, have been severed from this life that you knew. If you can just imagine what would happen if Boston was just completely emptied out and then forced to do that.

During that period our whole purpose for existing was to work and work and work. Life began at dawn. When you wake up you don’t have any food. You go to the rice fields and you plow, you plant, or in some cases you clear forests. In the middle of the day you get a small bowl of watered down rice. Then you go back to work and work, and you come home in the late evening.

For children, we had to go through a whole evening of propaganda indoctrination. My life then was composed of all of the work that I’ve just described and then, in the evening, having to sit and listen to a Khmer Rouge cadre basically telling us how wonderful the Khmer Rouge were. We had to sit there and literally say, “Angkar is great, Angkar will save us.” that was the extent of my childhood experience under the Khmer Rouge.

During that period systematic human rights violation took place that claimed almost two million lives. Many [people] died because of torture, execution, starvation, malnutrition. Many of them were targeted simply because they belonged to a certain class. They were intellectuals, or they had light skin, or they wore glasses, or they looked like they had foreign blood. In my case, I’m not pure Cambodian – my mother is half Chinese – but thankfully my father was full Cambodian and he was very, very dark. He belonged to a farmer’s family and that’s what saved us. Again, every time I describe it I don’t know where to start and I don’t know where to end because so much happened. I can only share with you the things that I had experienced personally and hope that you can take it in and see why what I’m about to describe is so absolutely important to the Cambodian-American community here in the United States.

After the Killing Fields, the Vietnamese force invaded Cambodia in 1978 and during that invasion there was a lot of confusion. None of us knew what we were going to do, but

fortunately my mother was smart enough to say, “This is no life, this is not a country that I could bring my children up in anymore.” So she just packed up whatever clothes, pots and pans, dried fish, and rice we had and started walking westward for a couple of weeks. We ended up in a refugee camp at the border of Thailand and Cambodia. That’s where we lived for a year. It was the fate of most Cambodians. The majority of them were not as lucky as I was. I managed to get out within a year because I had an uncle living in the United States who sponsored us. But, for the most part, most of the refugees languished in the refugee camps for up to twelve years. I won’t even describe to you the horrors of living in a refugee camp.

After living in these camps for years and years they ended up being resettled in third countries, such as the United States, France, and Australia. Most of them were resettled in the most terrible part of town where urban problems and violence was part of daily life. Chicagoans ended up living in a place called Uptown, Californians went to Long Beach, in Massachusetts most of them ended up in Lowell which is, thankfully, now becoming a vibrant town. They face the most incredible challenge just on a daily basis. Since most of the intellectuals were killed off during the Khmer Rouge, those who survived tended to be the farmers and urban dwellers who were not educated. So, if you can just imagine, after the Killing Fields the refugee life, and then arriving in the urban centers of the United States, not speaking a word of English, not understanding anything about the American culture, the American way of life. Not knowing that you can access services within the city governments and the state governments. The majority of them had suffered so much traumatic stress that they also have a lot of mental health problems, mentioned by Dr. Cabrera. A lot of the older refugees, for example, cannot see and the doctors would examine them and there’s no physical or medical cause for them not seeing. Many of them have constant headaches, constant hunger pains. Yet, there is no explanation.

Right now there is a lot of effort to try and deal with these kinds of issues from more of a mental health than a medical perspective. We’re finding out the linkage - that a lot of the people have seen horrible crimes committed in front of their eyes. So, for a lot of women who [can’t] see, it turns out that they had witnessed murders of their family members; and for those that experienced constant hunger pangs, it was because of the fact that they were starving for four years. Thankfully there is a lot of effort to try and deal with that.

Extremely helpful to the Cambodian refugees who arrived in the eighties were the Jewish communities and the Catholic communities. In the case of Chicago, the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, and affiliate organizations that belong to that Federation, was one of the first groups to actually help to resettle the refugees, provide services, and train them in accessing government services in order to help the community. That relationship began twenty odd years ago. To this day the Jewish Federation is one of the strongest supporters of what is happening with the Cambodian-American community. The Catholic community was extremely helpful as well, but we’re talking about the Holocaust experience and the Shoah so I just wanted to make sure that you all understand that the Cambodian-Americans would not have made it as far as they have without the help of the Jewish community. For that we owe a debt of gratitude forever and ever.

What we’re doing now is trying to help the community to move from basic survival, which they have been doing for the last twenty years, to planning for the advancement of the community in the future. In the process we’ve actually had to go back to our history of

surviving the Killing Fields. Many of [the survivors] have not been able to talk about their experiences for a long, long time. Myself included. For about twenty odd years I just did not want to have anything to do with the Killing Fields. It was just too painful. I just wanted to move on. But everything that I do today is a result of what had happened to me as a child. My decisions to go to school, to study human rights, to dedicate my career to doing social justice work, to work with the Cambodian community. Every time that I look back I think that most of the decisions that I make have been heavily influenced by the fact that I had to go through the Killing Fields.

We decided to make history in this country. For one very simple reason – the discussions of the Killing Fields and the Cambodian genocide was slowly disappearing from modern history. For a while it was very popular and even sexy in journalism to talk about the Killing Fields and all of a sudden there is now this image that the Cambodians are doing O.K., there is no need to pay attention to them anymore. The atrocity and everything for the most part had been forgotten. But we, as survivors, cannot forget it because it is a part of our daily lives.

We decided that in Chicago we're going to take on a project that is, for us, extremely challenging, but it is a project that must be done. We're going to establish the first Killing Fields Memorial and Cambodian-American Heritage Museum in all of the United States. We're hoping that it won't be the last. We're hoping that the success of this project will inspire other people to consider doing something similar within the different communities. As we're doing this, we needed the help of the Jewish community, the Catholic communities and everyone else under the sun because as a small poor community there is no way that you can hope to engage in this kind of project without reaching out. Again, the Jewish Federation came to our rescue and helped us to launch this project. As part of the visibility campaign we held an event called "Children of the Holocaust, Children of the Killing Fields." Putting two child survivors together - not myself – someone else along with a Holocaust survivor. In the process of doing that, we had to ask ourselves, "Why are we doing this and what is the implication?" One of the things that we were sensitive to was the fact that "the Holocaust" is something very specific to a community, in this case the Jewish community. Many people are very, very sensitive to the fact that the Holocaust cannot, or should not, be used to describe other events. As a survivor, and as someone who has lots and lots of friends from the Jewish community – and this kind of discussion has taken place so many times – we were very deliberate in not using "the holocaust" as a term to describe what had happened in Cambodia.

I feel very strong about respecting people's comfort zone. I know that there are many discussions and disagreements about when to appropriate a term and when to back off. But for the practical purposes of respecting a community that has been so helpful to us, we made that deliberate decision not to use the term in order to describe what had happened in Cambodia. Instead we're using a term that was made popular by a movie and has now become more or less synonymous with the Cambodian genocide – the "Killing Fields."

I cannot say that this is the feeling of all Cambodian-Americans. There are some Cambodians who use the term "the Cambodian Holocaust." I can't pretend to speak for [any other] person or group, but it does happen and I would hope that that group, at some point, would be able to come and have a dialogue, such as this, to gain a fuller perspective of

the sensitivities of using the term. Though I don't want to compare, I do want to point out that [with respect to] the Holocaust experience, the Cambodian Killing Fields, the genocide in Rwanda - there are universalities as well as uniqueness. Rather than trying to compare the two for our own academic purposes I would say that it is more useful for us, for example, to draw out the universality. In our case, the universality of the human suffering, the massive human rights violation, and an entire humanity stripped of dignity. The uniqueness is in the historical context, the geographical context, the ethnic groups. I would encourage us to have those kind of discussions rather than just comparing whose experiences were worse than the other. That does not serve the purpose of educating the public further.

So, why are we so keen to [make] a memorial and to preserve this? I think a lot of the presenters have answered that. The need to know your past, the need to understand it, the need to collect memory and the need to preserve experiences. But for the Cambodian-Americans, it's a little bit more personal that. A lot of the relatives that died, we don't even know what happened to them. For many survivors there is no closure of what happened to their husbands or wives, their brothers, sisters, or mothers. We're hoping that the memorial will be an institution that will help bring closure to a lot of the survivors who lost these relatives.

There is also a practical component in trying to promote emotional and psychological healing. The space of the memorial is going to be designed in such a way that people, especially survivors, can go and do what they need to do, whether it's to contemplate, to bring closure, to cry, to think, to do whatever is necessary in order for them to move on. There are several other reasons, but probably the most important reason, as far as I'm concerned, is the educational value that is going to come out the memorial project. Education for the younger Cambodian generations - my children, for example - but, more importantly, education for the general public which is slowly losing its understanding of what happened in Cambodia.

A lot of the work that I do now requires that I be on the phone with foundations to try and get them to understand the project. Usually I get two responses from the people that I'm talking with on the other phone. First, they ask "How do you spell Cambodia?" I'm not kidding. When I start telling them about the project the second question is, "The Killing Fields - isn't that a movie of some kind?" So you can see there is a huge need to educate the public about what happened in Cambodia. Not because it happened in Cambodia but because it was a massive human rights violation that stripped [all of us] of our dignity as human beings. That lesson is universal, regardless of your geography, race, and ethnicity. We're hoping to make some contributions to this country's education, to make a little bit of history. . .

## DISCUSSION

### Panelists

**Nadim Rouhana:** I would like to congratulate Chivy Sok on the project that her group is doing. I have a question that begins with her very last sentence. They are trying to commemorate what happened in Cambodia, not because it happened there, but because of

the universal lesson. I noticed that, in terms of naming, the logic, the rationale that was given for choosing the name – I'm trying to paraphrase your words here – is knowing the sensitivity of the name “Holocaust” for one community. Knowing the sensitivity and being, in a way, grateful, to the community that has been helpful.

That is an instrumental logic. It's not in line with the universalistic logic that you ended your talk with. I think we should be able – this is part of what this meeting is all about – to look at the universal lessons of *the* Holocaust and other holocausts – or whatever people want to name them – so that, as some of us, said, “Never again” is not never again to Jews, Cambodians, Rwandans, Guatemalans, but never again to anybody.

Would the way you are choosing the name be in line with this never universal “Never Again,” or not? In my mind, that would be the standard against which a name should be chosen rather than the instrumentality of being grateful to a community or not, because that's only in the short term. There are other ways of expressing gratitude, and that's something in the short term. The big project of “Never Again” universally, I think, could be a more guiding force in choosing the name.

**Edward Kissi:** Let me add something to that. In memorializing, you have to be very mindful of what you are memorializing. Fifteen, twenty, years from now the meaning will affirm what happened in Cambodia. When I look at what happened in Cambodia I see Nazi Germany all over again. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge argued that from now on the other languages do not exist, there is only one nation, the Khmer nation, and all of the other groups do not exist – the Cham Muslims, the Vietnamese, the Chinese, the Lao, the Thai. The Khmer Rouge was a racist organization. It wanted to create and sustain the world's first purist revolution. And so Khmer Rouge notions of purity were at the heart of what happened in Cambodia. Hitler used to talk about Lebensraum, living space. The Khmer Rouge felt that a pure revolution is the only revolution that took back Cambodian lands lost to Vietnam. So, in terms of ideological inclinations, the Khmer Rouge was expansionist. When you memorialize and then you take out some of these elements that compare adequately with the Holocaust experience it seems to me that by memorializing and comparing, you are even comparing the uniqueness of the holocaust in a variety of ways.

**Xu Xin:** I wanted to know what was the fundamental reason for the Khmer Rouge to conduct this kind of massacre or build Killing Fields in Kampuchea to kill their own people? In China, at the time, that was not very much reported. We saw it as kind of a revolution. The Chinese government at the time was involved one way or another because when the situation happened the Chinese government was actually supporting the Khmer Rouge.

Second question – you are trying to build a Killing Fields Memorial Museum and this project or idea is probably connected with the Holocaust Memorial Museum in this country. There are now so many being built. You also mentioned the fundamental rule that the museum was to educate people about “Never Again”. Will [your memorial make] connections in such a way?

**Locksley. Edmondson:** I just wanted to comment on the appropriateness of using the term “Holocaust.” It's one thing for Ms. Sok to say that Jewish sensitivities should become a dominant or preeminent factor. But, in my view, if you and your group feel uncomfortable

using it, that is good enough for me, whatever the reason. It is one thing to discuss it in an academic, theoretical sense. But you are on the ground doing something and you clearly feel uncomfortable about it. So, do what you have to do. Proceed with the alternative term.

Having set that forth, I still want to suggest something to think about. The word “Holocaust” is an applied one. It was not invented for the Jewish situation. It’s in the dictionary. The word predates the Nazi holocaust. It is a dictionary term. I looked it up. Therefore, it seems to me that a term which is part of dictionary discourse cannot then be just appropriated by a group itself. . . “If we use it, nobody else can.” It seems to me eminently unreasonable. I myself, for example, have no difficulty referring to the Holocaust as the standard [use]. That is a very defining issue that has come to be accepted as the Jewish Nazi Holocaust. . . I have no problem. But if other people want to say “a” holocaust or apply it to a situation – I think they actually have the right to do it and not to be trumped by any other group.

I repeat, it is an applied term. It was not invented by a group for a particular purpose. Otherwise, what do we do with language and phrases? Other groups can appropriate the term and use it and say from now on it should be close to others. It is unacademic, it is unintellectual, and it could be politically very dysfunctional.

### Audience

**Professor Samuel Bernstein:** This gathering is more than a conference. It has turned into more. It has turned into something that transcends academic concerns and will perhaps give some of us some vision of what might be possible in terms of human understanding, human freedom, cooperation in the future. I simply wanted to say that.

I have a comment and then a question. The comment has to do with Ms. Sok’s reference to the word “Holocaust” and then the response and questions by Dr. Rouhana and Dr. Kissi. This is a complex issue and I can tell you within the Jewish community itself there are differences of response on whether it is appropriate for others to employ the word “holocaust” to describe other terrible, genocidal, overwhelming experiences. If, in fact, others feel that the Jewish community – or many members of the Jewish community – are not comfortable with the use of that term to describe other experiences, then simply out of sensitivity it might be very kind not to use the term. Many people use the word either objectively to describe genocidal experiences or even to describe at once how terrible it was for the Jewish people in Europe and for other peoples in other experiences. But I’ve also heard it used in many instances aggressively, to sort of discount the importance, the differences, etc. Let’s see how I can put it.

I heard a talk by a prominent figure at a college near here who, by many people, might be called anti-Jewish. His comment was that the Jewish people put too much emphasis on their experience in the Holocaust. I feel [again] something that I felt this morning - and I discussed this already with Dr. Rouhana – the notion of describing “the Zionist enterprise” [as unrelated to] the Holocaust. This notion tends to lose the larger context of the particular experience of the Jewish people or, in fact, to say something negative. I don’t think that we want that. Nor am I suggesting that anybody here has intended that, but I think it is a

matter to raise. I think Ms. Sok is correct – it is a very sensitive subject for many Jewish people.

My question for Ms. Sok is a deeper one or at least a broader one. We have heard from so many of the speakers here about ways in which they are striving to preclude any further genocidal activities from taking place in the future. Clearly, everyone here writes and speaks; there are charitable organizations; there's work of all sorts; there are legal commitments, processes, etc. I'm curious if Ms. Sok would comment as to whether there is any overall kind of endeavor that we have not discussed, that we have not turned our attention to, that might make for the best chance that we will not have genocides in the future. Is it some sort of emphasis on economic justice? Is it some kind of an interactive program among many countries? Is it some governmental assumptions? A different institution? Changes in our institutions? My own guess is that, at the very heart of the problem – in every single one of these countries, in every single one of these instances – there has been a failure of empathy. I wonder whether or not there is something that anybody can think of that will bring us closer to each other?

**Susan Slimovics:** I am a professor of anthropology at M.I.T. I'd like to address the question of American-Jewish sensitivities to the word "Holocaust" and provide a different perspective. One of the things that I find particularly breathtaking and wonderful about this conference is that the word "Holocaust" has been extended and appropriated and enlarged and used fearlessly by people from the Third World. The one place where the word is policed and bounded is in the United States. I use that word deliberately. We must pay attention to the sensitivities of the American-Jewish community. It may be, as has been pointed out, a short-term political gesture. I understand the practicality. I appreciate them raising funds and why you would want to do that. But let me give you an example of how that can be extended even further.

One of the places that I did field work was in the Muslim community in Queens. They had come from India and one of their ritual symbols was the swastika – an ancient Aryan symbol. The iman of the mosque – out of empathy – with the Jewish community of Queens decided with the community's help that they would eliminate all evidence of the swastika from all of their ritual objects so as not to offend the sensibilities of the people around them. This is an example of Muslim empathy that I found quite astonishing. They replaced [the swastika] with a heart – you know that Valentine's Day heart. From one perspective this is a wonderful example of empathy. From another perspective, I find this part of an American Jewish policing not only of terminology of the Holocaust, but of so many other areas. Including the example we were given – the Zionist enterprise. This is something that should be combated by academics. Those who use this terminology [ought] to be free to discuss it and define it and not think in terms of those sensitivities.

**Chin Waimam:** I'm a student from the University of Massachusetts in Boston. I'm also from Lowell, Massachusetts which has the second largest Cambodian population in the U.S. outside of Cambodia. I'd like just to thank Chivy Sok for doing this wonderful project and to thank Chicago and all of the Chicagoans and the Cambodian-Americans there.

My question is: If I am correct, you made a visit to Cambodia to research for this project. How are the Cambodians or the Khmer people in Cambodia feeling towards this project?

What are their understandings? I believe I have only a little bit of knowledge because I am a child of child-survivor. My parents are survivors. When they mention Cambodia they would say the “Dous Lai” prison and that would commemorate the atrocity of the Khmer Rouge. That is the focal point that would describe what had happened. This being a rich and exciting and educational project, how do those in our motherland feel about it? Thank you.

**Professor Jerry Bergevin:** I understand the focus of the symposium is on Third World views. However, when we talk about the Cambodian experience – and the educational purpose of this project – it seems to me that part of the educational mission ought to be contextualizing this particular event within the experience of the American pursuit of the Vietnam War. Without that context, specifically the secret bombing of Cambodia, we don’t quite understand why we [in America] should have [such] a commemoration, a particular responsibility to the refugees from that area. Along with the earlier discussion about responsibility, at least some discussion ought to be made about the responsibility of the United States in that particular instance and its penchant for forgetting its own responsibility in some of these areas.

**Jack Nussan-Porter:** I’m an adjunct professor of sociology and genocide studies at the University of Massachusetts, in Lowell, which does have the largest Cambodian community outside of Phnom Penh. It is wonderful to see and to hear Third World people talking about the Holocaust in a respectful way. There is this image in the Jewish community – a defensiveness about having to defend our uniqueness because otherwise we are insensitive to other people’s genocides. But there is the other side of the problem, too. Within the Jewish community we must be more sensitive to your genocides without necessarily negating our own uniqueness.

We need to educate all communities. All people have suffered. There is no measurement to your suffering. Six million, two million, one million, ten thousand - What’s the difference? Yes, there are differences, but we all suffered and I think that that is a problem that we have to worry about as we commence the discussion.

### Chivy Sok Responds

Are we uncomfortable using the word “Holocaust”? “The” Holocaust? I don’t think discomfort is the word to describe our decision. What happened in Cambodia was a specific event in that country. There is an identity that goes with that – in our case it is the Killing Fields. If you were to use the Khmer term, actually we have another way of referring to what had happened in Cambodia and it is called “Tchenon Poit,” which means the era of Pol Pot. Once you say “Tchenon Poit” everybody knows what it means, because everybody lived it and there is a common bond of having survived it. I don’t want to give the impression that we’re uncomfortable using “a holocaust” to refer to the Cambodian experience but we are sensitive to the feelings of the [Jewish] community as far as using the term is concerned. That doesn’t mean that other people who make references to it should be censored. It really is an important discussion that has to take place. I think over time this level of comfort – and everything else – will evolve. Hopefully, new understanding and new cooperation and collaboration can take place because of forums like this. I’m hoping that in

the future the tension would not be there when you are discussing this kind of term. In our case it is a deliberate decision to refer to an event that happened in Cambodia.

I'm sorry about the last statement because I meant to say "not only because it happened in Cambodia, but because it has a universal lesson." Obviously, the event in Cambodia is very specific and it is unique in its own way. I don't want to discount that uniqueness. But, I did not mean to say "only".

[As for] educational value and contextualizing the responsibility of the U.S. – yes. If you notice, in our brochure there is a discussion about the bombing of the Cambodian countryside that helped the Khmer Rouge to actually gain power. So, it's definitely something that we're publicly stating in our brochures and our articles and our media engagement.

"Jewish community needs to be sensitive to other genocide, too." I wholeheartedly agree. [There is] the need for sensitivity. I encourage collaboration and discussions of the topics. Because if we don't work together – a lot of these concepts, and human suffering – will not gain the importance [they deserve]. The lessons that can be learned and drawn from will have been lost. So, in that sense I do agree.

But I do feel the need to be sensitive to each other. People have different stages of dealing with their survivorship. Having gone through the experience myself, I knew when I was ready to talk about it and I knew when I wasn't. I wasn't about to be pushed. For twenty odd years I put it behind me and it is only within the last several years that I have slowly come out of it and am willing to talk about my experiences personally. I'm Cambodian-American, but I cannot tell what the other Cambodian-Americans should do. It's an issue which they have to address individually.

"The fundamental reason why the massacre took place. Strong ties to China." In the simplest form, the Khmer Rouge wanted to recreate an agrarian society at its purest level. That was their entire intention. They wanted to get rid of everything that represented modernity, bourgeois ideology, anything that was un-Khmer. In that sense, they were very, very racist. As a result of that the massacre happened. So, that's the fundamental reason – it was creating a utopian society based on agrarian principle. The Khmer Rouge looked to the Chinese Revolution as the guiding principle and rather than working with the timeframe that the Chinese had for revolutionizing their country, the Khmer Rouge wanted to do it even faster. So, the policies implemented were based on wanting to beat the Chinese at recreating an agrarian society.

"Other endeavors that we haven't thought about that might be helpful." One of my favorite organizations – I have a lot of favorite organizations – is an organization called Facing History and Ourselves. It does wonderful work with public schools and charter schools all over the United States. The one that I know the best is in Chicago. They actually promote a lot of training of teachers on how to teach particularly sensitive subjects. How to teach tolerance, how to teach about difficult issues such as genocide, such as the Holocaust. They had a great exhibit – I think it's now in New York – called "Choosing to Participate." Through that exhibit and the work that they do in school, they ask us, as individuals, about the daily decisions that we make that have an impact on other people in society. The more

that I know about their work the more that I think it should become an international endeavor.

I hope that that kind of work – and the kind of conference that we're holding here – will eventually go to Cambodia because right now, if you can believe it, the history of the Khmer Rouge era is glossed over in the schools. You can imagine generations of Cambodians growing up without fully understanding what happened for [those] four and a half years. Some actually laugh about it when their parents and grandparents try to tell them the horrible life that they had lived under the Khmer Rouge. The reaction is one of disbelief. This is happening in Cambodia. How the politicians in Cambodia will react to [our project] remains to be seen.