Children of Cambodia

Journalist and essayist Roger Rosenblatt was born in 1940 in New York, where he now lives with his family. His book Children of War (1983), in which “Children of Cambodia” appears, took him to Thailand, Hong Kong, Israel, Lebanon, Greece, and Northern Ireland. In addition to winning the 1984 Robert F. Kennedy Book Award, Children of War was nominated for the 1983 National Book Critics Circle Award. Rosenblatt studied at New York University and Harvard University; he taught English and American literature at Harvard from 1963 to 1973 and was a Fulbright scholar in 1965–66. For two years he served as director of education at the National Endowment for the Humanities in Washington, D.C. He then became a columnist and literary editor for the New Republic, switched to the Washington Post, and finally moved to Time magazine, where he is a senior writer and essayist.

Cambodia first came to the attention of many Americans during the Vietnam War, when U.S. troops—supporting democratic South Vietnam—crossed its border to pursue Communist Vietcong guerrillas. As Rosenblatt notes, enmities in the region go back many centuries: the Khmer dominated the peninsula that now comprises Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam from the ninth to thirteenth centuries, losing its east and west coasts finally to invading Siamese and Vietnamese. France took control of most of the region in the mid-1800s. Prince Norodom Sihanouk ruled Cambodia from 1941 through its independence from France in 1953 until pro–United States Lon Nol seized power in 1970. In the early 1970s American troops left Vietnam; North Vietnam brought the South under Communist rule in 1975. That same year, in Cambodia, the Communist Khmer Rouge ousted the Lon Nol government. Then commenced the brutal regime of Pol Pot, who forced people out of the cities and towns to clear jungle and forest, and slaughtered not only his opponents but intellectuals and anyone else not aligned with his ideology. Over a million Cambodians were executed or died of hardship. Four years later, just as the United States recognized Pol Pot’s government, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and forced Pol Pot and his troops into the jungles, setting up an austere Communist regime.

(For more background on Cambodia and Vietnam, see p. 383.)

The road to Khao I Dang is a looping highway extending from Bangkok east-southeast 150 miles to the Thai-Cambodian border.

Socua assumes the task of telling me about the region. Socua is herself Khmer. She prefers the term Khmer to Cambodian, as do her countrymen, yet they also prefer Cambodia to Campuchea, since that is the name Pol Pot gave the country after his takeover in April 1975. Wherever possible, they seek to draw a distinction between the peaceful, dignified people once known as the Khmer and the murderers who called themselves the Khmer Rouge. Socua is in her midtwenties, self-confident, attractive, her black hair cut short like a flapper’s. A refugee herself, she lived and studied in San Francisco, and only recently came to Thailand to work with other refugees. Because of the war between the Khmer Rouge and the invading Vietnamese, travel to her homeland is impossible. She tells me that most of the people in Khao I Dang would also prefer to return home rather than be dispersed abroad.

For the present hope of return is out of the question. The Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge are staking each other in the jungles, leaving the innocent majority of Khmer terrorized, helpless, and starving. The Thais, suffused with traditional hatred of the Vietnamese and with traditional contempt for the Khmer, sell weapons to the Khmer Rouge. These are largely U.S. weapons. I discover that my country is in the idiotic and shameful position of recognizing the Khmer Rouge in the UN, arming them in the jungles, and accepting their victims as refugees. As a sidelight to the Cambodian war, the Thai government does nothing to restrain the Thai pirates from raping and slaughtering the Vietnamese boat people, including children, whose junk stays in Thai waters. Later in Hong Kong I read of a thirteen-year-old Vietnamese girl raped over and again by Thai pirates who passed her around. In seven days aboard the West German rescue ship she did not smile once. The nurses wept when they first saw her.

On a map one can see how close these now famous nations are—Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia—pressed together as tightly as four midwestern American states. The Thais first won independence from the Khmer in 1238. It has taken awhile to hone these enmities....

Many of the houses rest on stilts here. Socua tells me that in Cambodia the height of one’s house signifies how rich and important he is. The height of a house is often increased by piling roof upon roof. “If one wishes to determine how powerful you are, he will not ask directly, which would be rude. He will ask instead how many roofs your house has.” At least that was so when Cambodia still had gradations of self-esteem. That is gone now. Socua says, War has changed her people. A country known
for centuries for docility, gentleness, and pride — "known mainly for smiling"—is ravaged now, the people shaken, their former values ruined and cast away. "Still, you will see vestiges of the old dignity in Khao I Dang. Whenever parents want to discipline their children, all they do is remind them: 'You are Khmer. Behave like Khmer.' From a very early age, Socua says, the children are taught to honor, in this order, the land, the nation, their dead ancestors, their parents, their village, including their friends. "They continue to do so, even in a place like Khao I Dang."

In the middle of the morning on October 13, we arrive in Khao I Dang, swarmed immediately by small girls calling "Buy, please, buy," and selling wooden birds on wooden perches. Socua guides us through the children. She points to a huddle of Khmer adults waiting by the gate to be moved to trucks to other camps. Their faces are lifeless. At its largest Khao I Dang held over 120,000 refugees. That population is reduced to 40,000 now, a number that sounds more manageable, given the small-town size of the camp, about seventy square acres. Behind the neat rows of straw-roofed huts rises the mountain Khao I Dang, or "spotted bitch mountain" or simply "spotted mountain," evidently it translates both ways. Socua leads Matthew and me along Phnom Penh Road, a mud path named to recall the homeland of the Khmer. Their camp looks like an ancient village to me. Women in sampots skitter by with naked babies riding on their hips. Monks in yellow gowns sit cross-legged on long bamboo tables, their shaved heads lowered in contemplation.

We arrive on a holiday, the last days of the Buddhist Lent. Everyone smiles at us openly, the children tagging along. Some are in tatters. I find them astonishingly beautiful.

"They think you'll take them home with you," says Socua. "Take care to say nothing that would indicate you might."

Neil Boothby greets us at the Children's Center, a long, dirt-floor hut the size of a mess hall in an army camp. We wired Neil from Bangkok to say why we were coming. He has already engaged an interpreter for us. Socua is thus free to work elsewhere in the camp. She will arrange a dance performance by the children later in the day. Our interpreter, Khav Yuom, called Yuom, is a man so small and fresh-faced he could pass for a child himself. In fact, I take him for a teenager until I look at him more earnestly. Yuom is in his mid twenties. Partly because he looks like a boy, he not only managed to escape from the Khmer Rouge himself but to smuggle his wife and mother out of the country as well. He goes to get Ty Kim Seng, a ten-year-old who also escaped Pol Pot's soldiers and who arrived at Khao I Dang about a year ago. Ty Kim Seng is one of several children Neil invited me for tea to meet.

"He always talked fairly freely, even when he first came to the camp and looked like this," Neil slides a sheet of paper toward me across the kitchen table where we sit. It is a crayon drawing of a bright orange skeletal figure with a grim mouth in an open frown. Round teardrops fall from the skeleton's eyes. Ty Kim Seng drew this picture shortly after he arrived at Khao I Dang. He refers to 1976 when he was eight and was forced to join one of the mobile work teams instituted by Pol Pot for the Khmer children's "education and well-being." When Ty Kim Seng first walked down into Khao I Dang, he was nearly dead from malnutrition.

No longer, Ty Kim Seng enters the hut alongside Yuom and greets me with a wai, a small bow of homage in which one's hands are pressed together as if in prayer and raised to one's face, the fingertips stopping at about eye level. I return the gesture, asking Yuom with my eyes if I have done the wai correctly. I soon realize he would never risk discourtesy by telling me if I erred. Yuom and Ty Kim Seng take the bench on the opposite side of the kitchen table, and we begin to talk above the squeals of the children outside the hut. The boy is visible to the middle of his chest. He wears a white sport shirt. His face is bright brown, his head held in balance by a pair of ears a bit too large for the rest. The effect is scholarly, not comical... I ask a few introductory questions to which at first he gives only brief answers.

"Are your parents living?"
"No. They are dead."
"What work did they do in Cambodia?"
"My father was a doctor. My mother did housework."
"Would you also like to be a doctor someday?"
"No. I would like to be an airplane pilot." He tells me that once in 1974 he flew in an airplane from his village to Phnom Penh.
"Was it exciting?"
"It was wonderful." He smiles at last.

In fact, I had not needed to ask him if his parents were living. Neil gave me Ty Kim Seng's background earlier while we waited for the boy.

Ty Kim Seng's father was shot to death by a Pol Pot firing squad, for no reason other than that he was a doctor. The policies of the Khmer Rouge included the execution of all Cambodian intellectuals. The definition of a Cambodian intellectual was quite flexible. It included dancers, artists, the readers of books. Under Pol Pot it was a capital offense to wear eyeglasses, which signified one might be able to read. At the age of five Ty Kim Seng watched his father being taken away in a helicopter. A few days later the body of his father was returned to his village, also by
helicopter. For a long while in Khao I Dang, Ty Kim Seng only drew pictures of helicopters.

His mother died of starvation a few years later. By then, Ty Kim Seng belonged to the mobile work team and he no longer lived at home. His mother remained in their village, in which nearly everyone was starving. Much of the country was starving. Ty Kim Seng received word that his mother was very weak, and he managed to be taken to her. The night before she died he came to her bedside and saw how swollen she was, how weak her voice, with what difficulty she was breathing. The woman held her son’s hand and told him that very soon now he was going to be an orphan, that he would have to be strong and look out for himself.

Then her eyes focused more clearly for a moment, and she said to her son: “Always remember your father’s and mother’s blood. It is calling out in revenge for you.” She then told him to leave her room and to try to sleep.

At the time, Ty Kim Seng was keeping a diary, on which he would rely as a source of solace. He described this diary to Neil, but he had lost it by the time he came to Khao I Dang. In it he would begin his entries, “Dear Friend, I turn to you in my hour of sorrow and trouble.” On the night his mother spoke to him he could not sleep, and he wrote in his diary how helpless and frightened he felt. In the morning his mother was dead. He knelt at her bed and he prayed. Then he walked to the house of a neighbor and asked that man to bury his mother beside his father in the village cemetery. Ty Kim Seng brought a shirt with him as payment for this service.

The neighbor and his wife carried Ty Kim Seng’s mother in their arms to the burial ground, the boy walking several paces behind them. Ty Kim Seng was himself quite weak and thin. The neighbors buried his mother, burned incense, and departed. Then the boy knelt by the grave and burned three incense sticks of his own. Finally, he took a handful of dirt from each of his parents’ graves, poured it together in his hands, and beseeched his dead parents to look after him. Afterward, he returned to the mobile team.

“Do you feel your parents’ spirit inside you now?”

“Yes, it talks to me. It tells me that I must gain knowledge and get a job.” He says that knowledge makes people good.

“Does your spirit tell you to take revenge?”

“Yes,” solemnly.

“So, will you go back to Cambodia one day and fight the Khmer Rouge?”

“No. That is not what I mean by revenge. To me revenge means that I must make the most of my life.”

I place before him one of the other pictures he drew when he arrived at Khao I Dang, one that Neil showed me before, along with the skeleton drawing. “What is happening here, Ty Kim Seng?”

The drawing is of three boys, stick figures, standing to the side of several gravestones at night. The background consists of a large mountain with a leering yellow moon resting on its peak. Perched on a tree is an oversized owl, whose song, says Ty Kim Seng, is mournful.

“One day I left my mobile team to go find food for myself, to look for yams. I was very hungry. I met two boys, and together we came upon a mass grave of thirty bodies. They were piled up and rotting. The Khmer Rouge soldiers found me. I lied and told them I had gone for firewood. But they punished me. They bound my hands to a bamboo stick behind my back. I was tied up without food for several days.”

He is asked what it is that makes a man strong. He tells me, “a spirit.” Is there a spirit within him? “Yes. I talk to my spirit. I tell my spirit that I must study diligently and work in order to find a home in America. Or perhaps in France.” Yuon explains that France is much on Ty Kim Seng’s mind these days, because he has recently learned that his older brother lives there. The boy hopes to join his brother in France eventually, though for the present that is unlikely. The refugee allotments for all countries are quite low now.

“Is the spirit that makes you strong that of your mother and father?”

“Yes. My spirit told me how to find my way to the border when I escaped from the mobile team.” Neil told me that before making his way to Thailand, the boy walked more than sixty miles to Phnom Penh, hoping for news of his brother. I see him doing so as he talks, traveling mainly at night to avoid detection, the small face alert in the dark. I ask him if he believes his spirit will always guide him toward the right destinations. He says yes, definitely. “One day it will lead me home.”

Presenting his drawing of the orange skeleton, I ask if he would explain it too. “I drew this after the death of my mother,” he says softly. “I ate leaves then. That is why there is a tree in the picture.”

“If you drew yourself today, would the picture be different?”

“Yes, very different.” He looks happier. “Here I have food. And there would be a smile on my face.”

“Would you do a self-portrait for me now?” Unhesitating, he moves to a long worktable under a window at the far end of the hut. An elder provides him with paper and crayons, and he works in silence. The noise
of the other children has abated momentarily, the only sound being an occasional squawk of a late-rising rooster. Soon the boy returns and presents me with his drawing, which is not a self-portrait at all, but a bright blue airplane with green doors, green engines, and a red nose and tail.

“But where are you, Ty Kim Seng?”

“I am the pilot!” He points himself out enthusiastically. “We are flying to France!”

Yuom brings a second child to the table. I am beginning to feel like a village official, a census taker. At the window beside me, a square hole in the wall, little faces pop up and down, vivid with curiosity. Nop Narith performs the wai. He is Ty Kim Seng’s size and age, has shaggy black hair and great buck teeth that gleam in a smile. He holds his left arm below the table. Nop Narith had polio when he was younger, and the arm is withered. Both his parents are dead.

“When the soldiers came to my house, they took our whole family away. Me they took to a mobile team. I never saw my parents again. But I have a photograph of my father. My father was worried that I could not take care of myself. Yet I feel guarded by his spirit. I dreamed that I saw him, and he promised that his spirit would protect me. In the dream he told me to gain knowledge and to take revenge on his killers.”

I ask him what is the happiest time he has known. The Lon Nol regime, he says, because that is when his family prospered. Lon Nol deposed Norodom Sihanouk and was himself overthrown by the Khmer Rouge. “We had air conditioning then.” I ask what to him is the most important thing in the world. He answers, “Diamonds and gold.”

“Which would you rather have, a peaceful time or diamonds and gold?”

“Peace is worth more than gold,” he says.

“Your father’s spirit told you to gain knowledge. Does knowledge lead to peace?” He says that it does. “Your father’s spirit also told you to seek revenge against Pol Pot’s soldiers. Is it your plan to do that?” Again he says yes.

“What do you mean by revenge?”

The boy responds at once: “Revenge is to make a bad man better than before.”

Two more children come to talk with me, and they, like Ty Kim Seng and Nop Narith, define revenge either as self-improvement or as working to instill virtue in others. I wish to ask Neil about this. When I considered the subject of revenge in Athens, I only noted its absence in the children

I had met up to that point. I was defining vengeance conventionally. It did not occur to me that the idea could ever be applied in such a way as to make it an instrument of beneficence or generosity. Was this something cultural, I wondered. Something derived from Khmer history or from Buddhist doctrine? The Theravada version of Buddhism practiced by the Khmer centers on the Four Noble Truths, which define wisdom as abjuring worldly desires. Perhaps so worldly a desire as revenge would be thought to impede salvation.

A twelve-year old girl, Meng Mom, approaches the table next. She is puffy-cheeked and very shy. She toys with her purple sleeve throughout our conversation and only smiles and looks straight at me when I mention that her gold circular earrings are becoming. No other subject I introduce elicits a response. She will not speak of her father, who is long missing, or of life under Pol Pot. She will not make small talk. Yuom tries his utmost to encourage her. Still, nothing. Then once again I bring up the problematical question: “Meng Mom, why do men make wars?”

Suddenly she blurs out, “There are lot of bad men in the world.”

“How does someone manage to remain good if so many men are bad?”

“Good must fight the bad.”

“Can good and bad exist in the same person?”

“No. Not together. They are in separate places. The good must beat the bad.” All this is said quite rapidly. Then she is silent again.

I begin to suspect that the intensity with which the children contemplate the idea of good and evil residing in the same person has some connection with their unorthodox views of revenge as charity. That morning one of the other children I spoke with, Gnom Thy Rak, a boy of sixteen, told of watching a Khmer Rouge soldier cut a man’s throat in the jungle. When I asked what it is that makes someone do so dreadful a thing, he like the other children responded that some people are born with a good spirit inside them, some with a bad one, and that these two warring spirits cannot coexist in the same person. He added further that there are many more bad spirits than good ones in Cambodia these days. To the question, then, of how the good may ever prevail, he replied, “The good spirit must revenge the bad spirit,” meaning, I gathered, that while good and evil are discrete qualities, it is still possible for virtue to triumph by exerting its influence on the corrupted spirit.

The idea is admirable but illogical. If the world is divided between the predetermined good and the predetermined wicked, then how would either be susceptible to change by the other? Would it not have been simpler for these children to allow that good and evil do exist in some
proportions in everyone and that the problem of mastery is a continuous struggle? In order to answer that with a sure "yes," one would have to appreciate the depth and extent of the evil these children have witnessed and experienced. And clearly, some of the things perpetrated by the Pol Pot regime were so far beyond the imagination that the idea of a good spirit coexisting with that degree of evil must have seemed intolerable. Was it possible, then, that the children made their neat division of the spirits because they felt that no people who behaved like the Khmer Rouge could conceivably have any goodness in them?

Still, that would not account for the deep anxiety in their eyes and voices as they confronted this issue. What might explain it, however, was their knowledge that those who were carrying on the acts of murder and torture were neither strangers nor foreign invaders but were their own people, their neighbors, perhaps their relatives. This odd fact pertained in Northern Ireland and in the Middle East as well, but the depth and extent of destruction in those places was nothing like Cambodia. The term genocide has been used carelessly and indiscriminately since 1945, but what Pol Pot did was genocide, tens of thousands killed in a sweep. Some now call it "autogenous." The killers and the victims were one people: the same skin, the same hands. How does one explain such a thing to the satisfaction of one's conscience except to contend that some people must be born with one spirit, and some with another? To believe otherwise would be to suggest that Ty Kim Seng's father had in himself the capacity to be his own executioner, that Ty Kim Seng and Nep Phem and Meng Mom had that same capacity. It was a terrible thing to concede.

Could their idea of revenge thus be a way of dealing with the fear of evil in themselves? If they could see how dangerous a good and gentle people can become, was it not possible that the only form of revenge to which they might be susceptible would be the reassertion of greater goodness and mercy? Revenge, conventionally defined, cannot be taken against oneself. If hate destroys the hater, it does so doubly when the enemy is within. "Revenge is to make a bad man better than before," said Nop Narith. What the children meant by revenge might be that revenge is a self-healing act, a purification into compassion and wisdom, as Buddhism itself prescribes. Revenge is to be taken against fate, against a whole world of incomprehensible evil. Living well, in a moral sense, is the best revenge. Logical or not, such a thought was at least a way of avoiding the essential nightmare that each of us is his own beast in the jungle.

**EXPLORATIONS**

1. How do Rosenblatt's young Cambodian interviewees define "revenge"? What explanation does Rosenblatt suggest for their unusual views?

2. What happened to Ty Kim Seng and Nop Narith after Pol Pot's soldiers took over their villages? What happened to their parents? How did Ty Kim Seng get to Khao I Dang?

3. What aspects of Cambodian culture make this an unlikely country for war and genocide? What factors in the region's history make the war there not so surprising?

**CONNECTIONS**

1. Rosenblatt narrates his visit to Khao I Dang in the present tense, whereas Doris Lessing narrates her visit to Peshawar in the past tense. How do these strategies create different effects? What techniques do both Rosenblatt and Lessing use to make their narratives vivid?

2. Rosenblatt writes: "I discover that my country is in the idiotic and shameful position of recognizing the Khmer Rouge in the UN, arming them in the jungles, and accepting their victims as refugees." What explanation do you think Czeslaw Milosz would suggest for this tragic dilemma? What recommendations might he make to the individuals responsible for American policy in Southeast Asia?

3. The Observations by William Broyles, Jr., and Barbara Ehrenreich contrast sharply with the views about violence expressed by the children Rosenblatt interviews. What do you think are the reasons for the difference? What conclusions do you draw about people's (or men's) innate love of war?

**ELABORATIONS**

1. Examine George Gilder's Observation suggesting that the United States in a sense won the war in Vietnam. How do you think Rosenblatt would reply to Gilder? Which writer's viewpoint is closer to your own, and why? Write an essay summarizing the conflict between them and arguing on behalf of the position you agree with.

2. Rosenblatt and Doris Lessing both describe the changes war wreaks on people's lives. What dreams, regrets, scars, daily struggles, and fears for the future do the Afghan refugees in Peshawar, Pakistan, share with the Cambodians in Khao I Dang, Thailand? Write an essay defining what it means to be a war refugee.