

"What am I doing in New Hampshire playing soccer?"

Arn Chorn: Starting All Over

Cambodia and New Hampshire, 1970s

The Vietnam War destroyed the homes and shattered the families of many in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and other nations of Southeast Asia. Hundreds of thousands of refugees found their way to the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. Like immigrants before them, they struggled to learn English and adjust to a confusing new life. Arn Chorn was a quiet, musical boy of eight when soldiers from a brutal army called the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia in 1975. They enslaved him and fed him so little that he survived mainly on frogs and other animals he could catch. Four years later, when Vietnamese soldiers arrived to take on the Khmer Rouge, Arn was given a machine gun and forced into combat. A year later, so sick of killing that he was willing to risk his own life, he deserted. Arn Chorn's long journey to the United States began with a single step backward into the jungle.

Arn Chorn's official Khmer Rouge identification photo. It says he is sixteen, though he was really much younger. The Khmer Rouge boosted the ages in such photos to defend themselves against charges that they used children as soldiers.

In a war you have to shoot or be shot. Sometimes I didn't know whether I was shooting at a Vietnamese or a Cambodian. I just shot. We were so deep in the jungle we could barely see each other. When I found out I had killed someone I didn't want to think about what I had done. I would say, 'No, that couldn't have been my bullet.' Finally there came a moment when I couldn't take it anymore. I had seen enough death. I decided to escape.

"One night, when it was very dark, I simply slipped away into the trees. I took my gun and my hammock. For clothing I had only my black Khmer Rouge outfit, so badly torn it was almost like being naked. I had no shoes.

"I lived in the jungle for six months. Most nights I tied my hammock up between two limbs and slept in the trees. I looked for dry places in the jungle, but so did other animals. Sometimes I would wake to feel a snake crawling across me. Most Cambodian snakes are small and neurotoxic: when they bite you, you die. I made myself be still, and they would pass over me. It was the monkeys that helped me survive. You can hear them miles away. They scream from the tall trees and throw food at each other. A lot of it would hit the ground and I would get it.

