

Wall Street, U.S. Republicans, and Haider

Some of Haider's political friends, who do not necessarily agree with his liberal economic policy (e.g., his support for privatization), speak about Haider "kow-towing to Wall Street, and reaping nothing in return." Be that as it may, political observers point to Haider's close connections to circles in the U.S. Republican Party, connections which are rather covertly cultivated.

One of the contact people to these American circles is FPÖ Member of the European Parliament (and former leading candidate of his party) Peter Sichrovsky, who has a house in Hollywood, and who flew to the United States from Brussels just before the Vienna coalition took shape on Feb. 3. In 1996, Sichrovsky drew attention to himself through his work on the autobiography of the head of Frankfurt, Germany's Jewish community, the late Ignatz Bubis, when that collaboration apparently led to some friction with Bubis. Last year, he campaigned among other MEPs—as a Jew—for the establishment of an Orthodox Jewish association in Berlin, which also led to conflict. And, following Haider's electoral success in Kärnten, he organized four rabbis to sign a declaration certifying Haider's politically correct bill of health.

Haider—whose economic policy is rather close to that of former British Prime Minister Lady Margaret Thatcher—looks more like an "allied project" of the Conservative Revolution of a Newt Gingrich (whose role models are Robespierre and the Jacobins) than the much-touted "danger from the right." After all, the predecessor of the FPÖ, the Association of Independents, a collection pot for Nazi sympathizers, was set up by the "allies" in the 1950s and '60s (similar to the German NPD) in the context of the postwar arrangements.

So, what gambit are German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, Irish MEP Patrick Cox, and French MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit really playing when they fire their cannonades of verbiage (which cost them nothing) against Austria? These "great democrats" and "Europeans," who were so eager to have a war over Kosovo, have accomplished nothing to reconstruct the devastated Balkan region. Austria would surely play a crucial role in such a reconstruction, just as the country was active in the past in difficult situations as a diplomatic bridgehead between East and West, and North and South.

The European Union bludgeon has wreaked immense damage.

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Book Reviews

Fighting like hell to live till tomorrow

by Gail G. Billington

First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers

by Loung Ung

New York: HarperCollins, 2000

256 pages, hardbound, \$23

April 17, 2000 marks the 25th anniversary of a major event, one that will not likely be celebrated by Cambodians. April 17, 1975 was the day the Khmer Rouge seized power in Phnom Penh, Day One of Year Zero, the beginning of a reign of radical ideology-driven terror that would lead to the deaths of perhaps more than one in five Cambodians until the combined forces of Cambodian nationals and Vietnamese soldiers drove the Khmer Rouge from power in 1979. The nightmare did not end then, as Cold War geopolitical maneuvering among the great powers on the UN Security Council continued to insist that the Khmer Rouge have a seat in peace talks up until the 1993 UN-sponsored election. And even afterward, political maneuvering preserved the Khmer Rouge as the crucial "wild card" that continued to threaten progress toward stability until the end of 1998, when the last surviving senior leaders surrendered. Many believe that the Khmer Rouge is still a threat.

Loung Ung's book is a memoir of the members of her family's lives, and deaths, during the Khmer Rouge years. It is also a tribute to who she has become. She is the national spokesperson for the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation's Campaign for a Landmine-Free World. In an interview with the Feb. 3 *USA Today*, Loung Ung said of her book: "I hope that people will take away from it that it's more than a war story, that it's more a story of love and family and hope and just fighting like hell to live until the next day."

This is not an easy book to read, but it compels the reader to keep going. Every Cambodian has a story, every family was affected by this reign of terror, but there is always a hesitation: Are *you* prepared to hear that story? Are *they* prepared to tell it?

This is a child's relived story of that time, of that war. Repeatedly, throughout the book, the reader is caught up short, with a gasp, by a reminder that Loung, the storyteller, was five years old when her family's odyssey began on April 17, 1975, and nine years old when she embarked on a new odyssey that would bring her to America, as one of the thousands of "boat people" escaping the Indochina wars.

Loung Ung was the sixth of seven children born to Ung Seng Im and Ung Ay Choung. The father, Ung Seng Im, was part-Chinese; his wife, Ung Ay Choung, was all Chinese, tall for a woman and very fair-skinned. After marriage, the father became a Phnom Penh policeman, and was subsequently promoted to the Cambodian Royal Secret Service. After a brief foray into private business, he was conscripted back into government service with the rank of major, under the Lon Nol government, which overthrew Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1970. Ung Seng Im accepted the commission reluctantly, knowing that if he did not accept, "he would risk being persecuted, branded a traitor, and perhaps even killed." A clear "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation.

Loung asks him, "Why? Is it like this in other places?"

"In many countries, it's not that way," he says. "In a country called America it is not that way."

"Where is America?"

"It's a place far, far away from here, across many oceans."

"And in America, Pa, you would not be forced to join the army?"

"No, there, two parties run the country. . . ."

'New people'

Loung's family lived comfortably in Phnom Penh; she was aware that her family was better off than some of her friends. The children were all multilingual, studying Khmer, French, and Chinese. The eldest son, Meng, 18 in 1975, had planned to leave for studies in France on April 14, but because April 13 was New Year's, he delayed his departure, a departure that never came.

The father's job, the family's Chinese background, middle-class status, and educational accomplishments marked them for extermination when the Khmer Rouge took control in Phnom Penh, and began the forced evacuation of the city, whose population had more than doubled as refugees flooded the capital to escape the U.S. carpet bombings along the border with Vietnam.

In answer to the children's questions—Who are the



The author, Loung Ung, and a little girl selling goods on the street at Angkor Wat, as published in First They Killed My Father.

Khmer Rouge? What do they want from us? Why are they so mean?—the father replied, "They are the destroyers of all things."

To survive, the family had to hide their background; a curtain of silence fell over the family that the children, aged 18 to 3, had to keep on pain of death. On April 17, 1975, this family became "new people," the Khmer Rouge's name for city people, all of whom were considered corrupt and a potential threat. They joined the wandering masses of Cambodians driven into the countryside, where the Khmer Rouge relied on "the base people," illiterate peasant farmers who had never left their village.

Loung's family started their exile from Phnom Penh in an old truck, which they drove until it ran out of gas. Then began the endless walk, carrying as much food as they could and what few possessions they could manage besides. But no matter how much food they carried, it quickly became clear that there was never enough, and the threat of starvation became an ever-present painful goad to keep going.

The first night on the road, Loung's mother handed her wads of money to use as toilet paper—after all, the Khmer Rouge had blown up the central bank and currency was abolished—but five-year-old Loung protests, "But, Ma! It's money!"

Four days of walking later, the family reached their first Khmer Rouge checkpoint, and their introduction to "Angkar," literally, the organization, the new name for the Khmer Rouge government. Soldiers screamed, "If you lie to Angkar, we will find out! The Angkar is all-knowing and has eyes and ears everywhere!" Refugees with ties to the former Lon Nol government were begged to help "Angkar" build this new

regime. In the morning, Loung's brother Meng whispered to his father that the soldiers had gunned down all those who had signed up. On April 25, eight days' walk from Phnom Penh, the family reached the village of Loung's maternal uncles. Loung's family of nine would share a one-room thatched hut with their uncle's family of eight.

A threat to 'Angkar'

So began this family's struggle to survive. As new refugees arrived, they were forced to move on, out of fear that some of the arriving refugees would betray the family's past in Phnom Penh, and they would all be killed. In July 1975, the family moved to the village of Anlungthmor. Only a few months later, at the end of the rainy season, when the village was in panic for lack of food, Loung's father told the family: "We have to leave. People are discontented. They are hungry. The native villagers are suspicious of everybody, and they are asking too many questions. We are different, your Ma speaks Khmer with a Chinese accent, you kids have lighter skin, and, besides me, this family does not know much about farming, so the villagers will make us the first scapegoats for their problems." In the morning, they left with only the clothes on their backs. The father told the older sons, "The killings have started. The Khmer Rouge are executing people perceived to be a threat against the Angkar. This new country has no law or order. City people are killed for no reason. Anyone can be viewed as a threat to the Angkar—former civil servants, monks, doctors, nurses, artists, teachers, students—even people who wear glasses, as the soldiers view this as a sign of intelligence. Anyone the Khmer Rouge believes has the power to lead a rebellion will be killed. We have to be extremely careful, but if we keep moving to different villages, we may stay safe." Oldest son Meng reported that in the five months the family stayed in Anlungthmor, more than 200 of the 300 new people who had arrived, had died of starvation, food poisoning, and malaria. The youngest child, Geak, age three, her growth already hopelessly stunted, cried out, "Hungry, belly, hurts."

To Angkar, hard work was loyalty, while education cluttered children's brains "with useless information." Everyone worked hard. Loung's father worked harder than others to combat the risk of any suspicion of his background. Briefly, son Kim, age 10, worked in the household of the village headman, who allowed Kim to take home the scraps from his table, on which Kim's family feasted. But, for this life-saving bonus, Kim endured daily beatings from the headman's sons.

Beginning in January 1976, the family was split up. The Khmer Rouge were conscripting able-bodied refugees into their army. By mutual agreement of the parents, second son Khouy, 16, was married to Laine, out of concern to keep them both alive, not love. The Khmer Rouge ordered oldest son Meng to join the young couple in a labor camp. A few months later, eldest daughter Keav, 14, was ordered to a teen work camp.

On the first anniversary of the Khmer Rouge's victory, starvation and disease dominated. A man in Loung's village killed a mangy, emaciated stray dog, and ate it. The Khmer Rouge killed him, because he did not share the dog with the village. A neighbor, Chong, went insane, watching her children die of starvation, and food poisoning. But Chong confided to Loung's mother that she had found the perfect food—earthworms!

In August 1976, daughter Keav died a horrible death from starvation and food poisoning; she died before any family member could reach her. In December 1976, Loung's father whispered to her mother that the Khmer Rouge had learned of his past, and they must prepare to send son Kim, 11, daughter Chou, 9, and Loung, 6, to an orphanage camp. In the morning, two Khmer Rouge soldiers appeared at the door, requesting the father follow them, never to return.

Loung's rage at the murders of her sister and father drove her determination to live until she could avenge their deaths, by killing the name that had replaced the ubiquitous "Angkar," the name, Pol Pot.

Shortly after the second anniversary of the Khmer Rouge's victory, in May 1977, Loung's mother acted on her husband's advice, ordering Kim, 12, Chou, 10, and Loung 7, to leave, each in a different direction, until they reached a camp, where they should declare themselves orphans. The girls stayed together until Loung got into a fight with another girl, who denounced Loung as a "stupid Chinese-Yuon," an extremely derogatory epithet the Khmer Rouge still use for Vietnamese. Loung was transferred to a camp to be trained as a child soldier, at age 7, but not before she told her sister, "Chou, I dream of the day when we have power again. I will come back for them. I will get them back and beat them until I am tired. I won't forget, not ever."

Chou replied, "Why would you want to remember? I dream of the day when things are nice again, and I can leave all this behind."

In the child-soldier camp, Loung was subjected to intensive indoctrination and trained, with others, to use ordinary tools as instruments of death, a scythe to slice off heads, a hammer to smash skulls. She was drafted into a dance troupe, which sang songs about killing "Yuon." But, hearing music, any music, was a relief. Her teacher told these soldiers: "Children must be taught to follow orders without hesitation, without question, and to shoot and kill even their traitor parents. That is the first step of training." Loung, seven years old, did guard duty, holding a rifle, which she had to cradle against her chest because her fingers were not long enough to wrap around the stock.

In May 1978, the surviving members of the family were reunited in an infirmary, the only one in the area, all suffering symptoms of starvation. There was no medicine, no doctors, no hygiene, no care.

In November 1978, Loung awoke in a panic, in agony from hunger, enraged by the endless indoctrination and prac-



Photos from *First They Killed My Father* (from left to right): author Loung Ung today; author (right) and sister Chou, 1975; Kim, Loung's mother, Geak (the only surviving picture of her), the author, Chou, and Khouy.

tice killing sessions. She disappeared for three days to see her mother. But mother and youngest daughter Geak, now five, were nowhere to be found; they had been escorted away by soldiers.

In January 1979, combined Cambodian and Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia—the hated “Yvon” to the Khmer Rouge. Pandemonium took over. A new mass exodus swept the camps. Kim, Chou, and Loung were reunited, and survived by living with a succession of foster families, but not without new horrors, including an attempted rape of Loung, a Khmer Rouge assault on shelters, and dodging bullets. In February, the three were reunited with older brothers Meng and Khouy, and eventually, the children met up with their maternal uncles. Meng, his wife, and Loung travelled to Vietnam, where they joined the exodus of “boat people” coming to the United States.

While waiting in the Lam Sing refugee camp in Thailand, Loung dreamed she was with her father and whispered to him:

“Pa, I’m leaving for America tomorrow. Eldest brother said America is very far from Cambodia, very far from you. . . .”

“Don’t worry. Wherever you go, I will find you,” Pa replied.

A new chapter

The release of Loung Ung’s book is well timed. Work is nearly complete on a draft law, laying out the mechanics for a tribunal to put senior surviving Khmer Rouge leaders on trial. Cambodian Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen has said that he would like to see a tribunal convened by March,

which would mean that the 25th anniversary of the Khmer Rouge victory would be marked by seeing these senior leaders on trial. It is unlikely that that deadline will be met, as it would require an extraordinary session of the National Assembly to pass the draft law governing the tribunal. The spring session is not now slated to open until after the April 17 anniversary. Conflicts also persist in whether or not the United Nations will cooperate with the framework defined by Cambodia.

In spite of this situation, an important process is under way in Cambodia. On Jan. 27, in the city of Battambang, the first in a series of three forums on “National Reconciliation and the Khmer Rouge,” sponsored by the Center for Social Development, brought Khmer Rouge leaders face to face with their victims for the first time in 25 years. Among the 120 participants was a large contingent of former Khmer Rouge cadre, including intellectuals and one general. The *Phnom Penh Post* reported in its Feb. 4-17 issue that, even though a majority of speeches came out against a tribunal, in a secret ballot, the participants voted overwhelmingly for a tribunal. The sponsor of the forum series and other analysts agree that a trial alone will not put to rest the trauma of the Khmer Rouge period.

Author Loung Ung approached the problem in her Feb. 3 *USA Today* interview: “There are still times now when I wish I didn’t remember what happened. But when I dissect it, when you look at it, when you search around in it, when you name it, when you put your fingers and face and heart into it, it loses that unimaginable power over you.”

Thank you, Loung Ung, for this book.