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The Interpreter of Memories From The Killing Fields

By Elizabeth Becker
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In the movie "The Killing Fields," the world came to know Dith Pran as the resourceful eyes and ears of New York Times reporter Sydney Schanberg. Pran is the quiet Cambodian employed by the aggressive American to interpret the language, culture and politics of Cambodia. And it is Pran who risks his life over and over again for his friends as his country is blown to bits, motivated by courage, loyalty and love rather than a newspaper reporter's deadline or sense of righteous indignation.

Through the film, his story became Cambodia's story and introduced the horror of the Khmer Rouge to much of the world. Unlike the foreign nations and Cambodian politicians and princes who nearly destroyed his country, Pran, who died of cancer Sunday at 65, was a witness without blood on his hands. And unlike so many of his compatriots, Pran refused to look away. He demanded that the story be told, during the war and afterward.

The first thing you noticed about Dith Pran was his grin, a lopsided smile that spoke of trust, not deference. He was that rare Cambodian who treated everyone with dignity, despite his country's cultural traditions of arrogant hierarchies and ruthless inequities. And with those open eyes of his, he was able to look beyond the boundaries of his life and see the frightening path that lay ahead for his country.

Fortunately, Pran's open-mindedness carried over to me. We met in 1972. I was a 25-year-old newly minted journalist, escaping South Asian graduate studies. In an overwhelmingly male foreign press corps, I was a woman trying to follow the footsteps of Kate Webb and Sylvana Foa.

Pran, the informal dean of the Cambodian press corps, watched me struggle for a few months. When he was convinced I was something more than an American hippie, he took me under his wing. First he made sure I had the wherewithal to do my job.

"Becker," he said. "Take my car."

For several months, Pran lent me his Volkswagen Beetle, free, until I landed better employment than my \$150-a-month gig with a now defunct newsmagazine. When I became the contract stringer for The Washington Post, a competitor of his employer, the New York Times, Pran said it didn't matter. We were still colleagues. We still shared news tips because then, as now, colleagues could die blundering down the wrong highway.

Every morning the small Cambodian press corps met for open-air coffee at the Cambodian military briefing presided over by an officer named Am Rong, a lovely man, and one whose name was a source of endless jokes. Pran would look at the posted summary of war news: the number of wounded and killed, the location of the latest front in the fluid war. Then, if none of the New York Times reporters were visiting on assignment, he would tell us where to find the best military story and off we would go in one of the white Mercedeses that began as limousines for the Angkor tourist trade before being commandeered for the international press corps the first year of war. More importantly, he told us which fronts were too dangerous for us.

Multiply my story several times over and you have a hint of the role Pran played in telling his country's story through the press and then, eventually, through his own life. Nothing in his background hinted at his future role. He was a former Angkor tour guide, like most of the other bright Cambodian photographer-translators: Chhay Born Lay of the Associated Press and Chhum Ben San of NBC, to name just two. Like them, he spoke French, as well as English.

But Pran was more. He was resourceful to a fault. He dogged a story, melting into the background when necessary to search out a friend or relative who knew someone who could get that ride on the helicopter. He always had that \$100 bill in his pocket when a bribe was in order. He knew when to bow and scrape, when to put his arm around a man's shoulder and when to bring sacks of rice for villagers fleeing the war. That was why he found himself the highly paid translator and fixer when the Khmer Rouge marched into Cambodia and declared Year Zero, the beginning of the most radical revolution in modern history, which left nearly one-fourth of the country dead in less than four years.

So how did Pran, a sophisticated journalist, survive when the Khmer Rouge was rooting out and killing most intellectuals?

A Cambodian banker I know survived by playing the village idiot. Pran survived by reading character. His brilliance as a journalist for figuring out chaotic situations in war was critical during the revolution. He, of course, hid his background, but he read people the way he had read all of us, foreigner and Cambodian alike. He knew what we were good for and where we were hopeless. During the Khmer Rouge revolution, he had to rely on those finely honed instincts to survive.

That was the other secret to Pran; he desperately wanted to survive. He was married and the father of four beloved children. (He made sure they were evacuated from the country to the United States before he stayed on with Schanberg.) He was imbued with the peculiar Cambodian *joie de vivre* that included a silly sense of humor, an earthy appetite for food and romance, and a Buddhist sensibility that Westerners sometimes confused with fatalism.

At one of the early showings of "The Killing Fields," I ducked out after a wrenching scene of a child's death and found Pran in the lobby. He, too, had trouble sitting through the movie. I asked him how he had survived under the Khmer, before finally escaping,

weak with malaria, to a refugee camp in Thailand and then to New York, where he became a full-time photographer for the Times. But those years were still too raw. He wanted to talk about the rare lighter moments of the war, when we would jump on our mopeds and race out of the city, trying to forget the atrocities we had chronicled.

A decade later I joined the New York Times and regularly saw Pran in the main newsroom, where he was something of a legend. He was still a photographer, but he spent much of his free time and money trying to help Cambodia. He started a center to explain the Khmer Rouge genocide. He lectured. He tried to keep one foot in Cambodia while living in the United States. But the years were wearing on him. He had lost some of his remarkable optimism. His own life hadn't turned out as he had expected, and his country was becoming corrupt and cruel all over again.

"Becker," he said, "what can we do for Cambodia?"

I shook my head. Wasn't it enough that his story had been made into a film that, in a single stroke, had done more to explain the Khmer Rouge than all of the articles and books the rest of us had written?

Pran wouldn't listen. There was always more to do, precisely because he had become the ultimate witness to the Cambodian tragedy. That was his burden; his life. And we are all better that he bore it so gracefully, but I don't know how he did it.

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