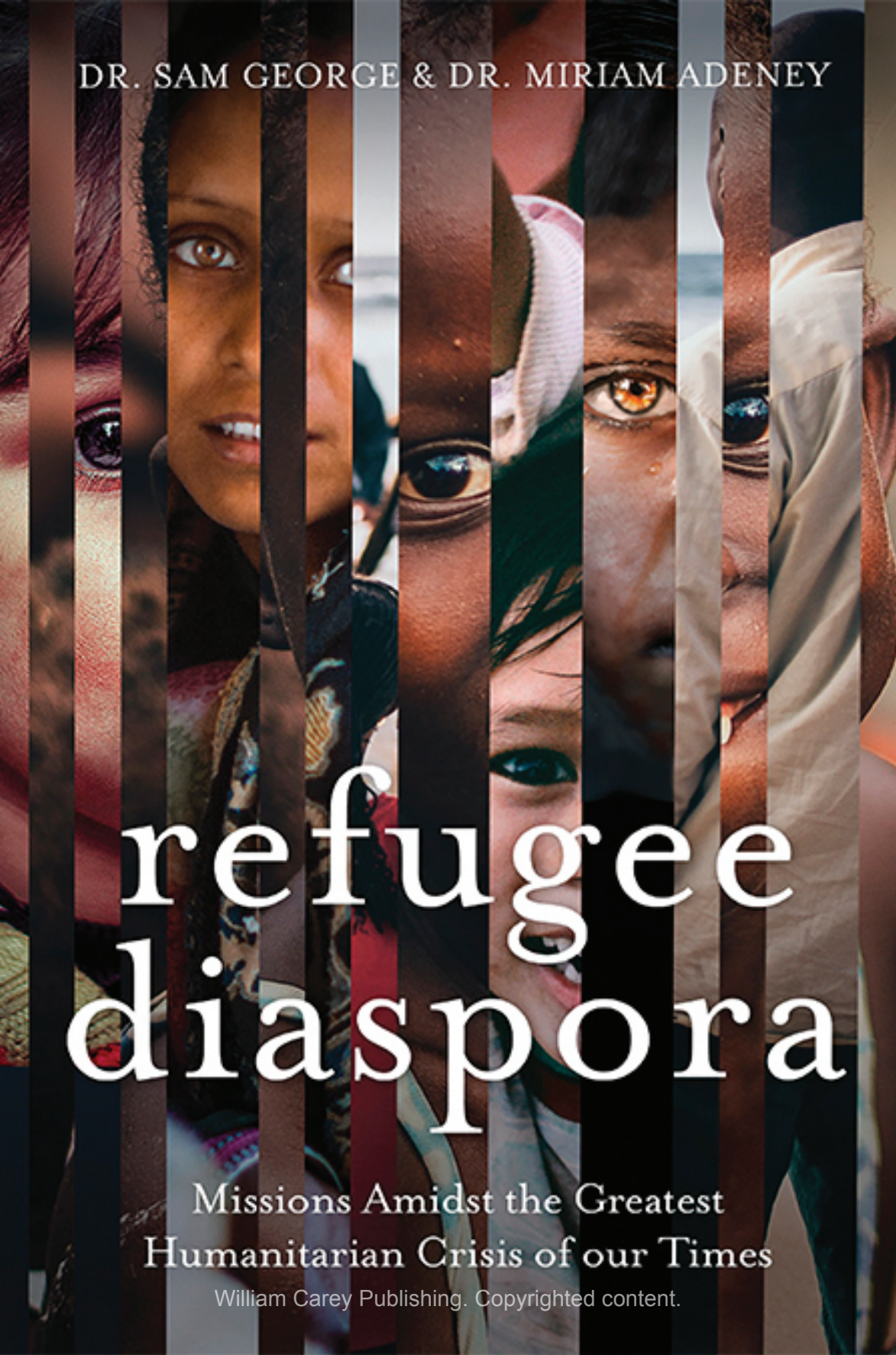


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# chapter one

## *From Genocide to Kingdom-building in Cambodia*

Ken Kong

### BORN TO RUN: OUT OF CAMBODIA

My parents were in their teens when they first met in the Pursat labor camp in Cambodia. Their meeting wasn't something they planned themselves. It was arranged by the Khmer Rouge. They went to my father and said, "Mut (comrade), you see that woman? That is the woman we want you to marry."

My father responded, "Can I meet with this woman in person?"

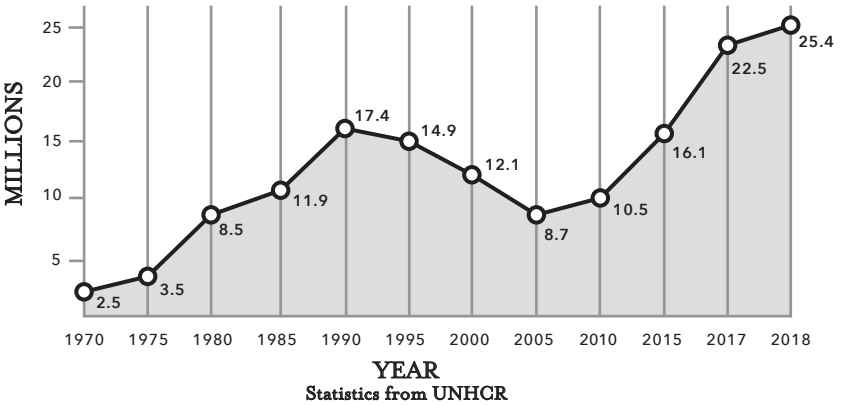
Then the Khmer Rouge went to my mother and said, "Mut, you see that man? That is the man we want you to marry. If you don't agree to this we will execute both you and that man."

Due to my father's request, they arranged the first meeting between my mom and dad. After that brief encounter, my dad left feeling and knowing that he was in love with my mom.

Their wedding was simple and with no fanfare. The Khmer Rouge wrapped a dirty old scarf around their hands and gave the pronouncement that they were married. This was the beginning of a journey between my father and mother. I was born in the winter of 1978 during the reign of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge government, which lasted from 1975 until 1979. My mother gave birth to me in the Pursat labor camp, where she worked day and night. At that time, my father was stationed in the Siem Reap labor camp (a three-to-four-day walk from Pursat). In that camp they were forced to dig and gather rocks for no apparent purpose other than to do what the Khmer Rouge wanted them to do.

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*Figure 2: Number of Refugees Worldwide (1970–2018)*




During my father's imprisonment from 1976–79 in Siem Reap, my Om (Uncle) Chouch took care of my mom, older brother, and myself. With the approval of the Khmer Rouge, my father was allowed to visit us from time to time. Om Chouch had a big family of his own to care for; but he knew if no one cared for us, we would not be able to make it on our own.

*Angka*—what the Khmer Rouge wanted us to call the government—separated my parents. Angka wanted complete control of our lives: what we thought, what we ate, how we worked, whom we married, and where we lived. During our time in the Pursat camp, when I was only two years old, my older brother, Kim, got sick. My mother went to the person who was responsible for rationing food. She asked if they could give her a little extra for her son. The emotionless reply was "No! It wouldn't be fair to the other families if we gave your son a little more."

Later that night, my older brother looked at the banana leaves hanging above his head and said, "Mom, I'm hungry." Then he fell asleep beside her. The next morning my mother tried to wake him up, but his body was cold and stiff; he died from sickness and starvation. Because I was so young, I didn't know this part of our story until my mother told me when I was in my late teens. There was no way to get the news to my father.

While at the camp in Pursat, my uncle (my father's older brother) was executed in front of my father. Fearing that he would be killed next, my father decided to escape. He weighed his options: "Should I flee to the refugee camp in Thailand or head south to rescue my wife and my two sons?" Heading south would make his trip much longer and increase the risk to his life greatly. But he didn't want to leave without us, so he decided to take the longer and more risky option.

While the Khmer Rouge soldiers were making their rounds in the middle of the night, my father found a makeshift canoe. He hid from the Khmer Rouge

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in the cover of darkness and headed southward toward Pursat. When he reached my mother and me in our camp, he was heartbroken to hear about the death his oldest son, and he became even more determined to free us from the horrors of living in the camp.

My father begged my mother to leave the camp and head toward Thailand. He went and hid in the woods for a couple of days so that she could get our belongings together and say goodbye to her relatives, knowing that she would never see them again.

While my father was in hiding, the Khmer Rouge came to my mom and asked, "Have you seen your husband?" My mother responded, "I have not seen him." Angka said, "If you are lying to us and we find out, we will execute you and your son." That night, my mother couldn't sleep. She stayed up all night thinking about how she would respond to the Khmer Rouge when they came to question her again. She decided to ask them to take her but to let her son live.

The next morning my father showed up, took my mom and me, and we got into a beat-up rickshaw motorcycle and made the escape to Battambang, Cambodia's second-largest city. I was about three years old. Once we got there, we ran out of money and food. We continued on foot about seventy-two kilometers from Battambang to Srey Sisophon, and then walked another thirty-one kilometers to the Thai border. At night, we tried to sleep in places that were safely removed from the Khmer Rouge, thieves, the Viet Cong, and wild animals. We ate whatever we could find, mostly tree-bark soup with little critters my parents caught on the journey.

In Srey Sisophon, my mother told my dad that she couldn't walk any farther. She had been walking for days and her feet could no longer take it; they were bleeding and throbbing with pain. She told my dad to take me to the refugee camp and let her die there. My dad said that wasn't an option. He wouldn't leave her to die on her own. With exceptional courage, my mother was able to walk a little farther.

When we reached the border, we weren't allowed to enter into the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp, so we had to stay along the refugee camp border. My sister, Channa, was born there and was severely ill. Due to her sickness, the doctors in the camp allowed our family passage into the camp. Once there, my dad pleaded with the doctors and whoever would listen not to send us back into Cambodia; it was too dangerous for us. One of the officials took heed of our pleading and allowed us to live in the camp.

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## THE REFUGEE CAMP: BIRTH AND DEATH

From 1980 to 1981, we lived in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp in Sa Kaeo. During that time, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) commissioned my father to teach the written Khmer language to other Cambodian people, which brought in a little income for our family and increased our status in the camp.

My younger brother, Davy, was born in this camp. He was only a year old when he got very sick. My parents took him to see a doctor. A couple of hours later, the doctor came out and said that my brother had died. This sad news devastated my parents. Later that day they took my brother to the local Buddhist temple and had him cremated.

I remember that in the morning I saw my brother in my father's arms, and later that evening they came home without him. It was hard on me. It was hard on all of us. Prior to learning the details of my brother's death, which were only disclosed to me much later, I lived with survival guilt, thinking that I might have been responsible for his death.

My parents first heard about Jesus in this refugee camp. In fact, our next-door neighbors were Jesus people. They shared about Christ with us, but we chose not to believe. How could we? From our perspective, Jesus wasn't there to help us when we were running from the Khmer Rouge and Viet Cong. At that time, Jesus didn't seem real and we couldn't believe that he really cared for us. So we thought.

My aunt, who was living in the United States at that time, had sponsored our immigration process by filling out the papers and submitting them to the authorities. Like many families, my parents would check the community board daily for our family name. The community board would list families who were sponsored to go to France, the US, and other Western countries. After months of waiting, we saw our family name appear on the community board and learned that my aunt had sponsored us to come to the US.

## PHILIPPINES REFUGEE PROCESSING CENTER: A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

In the winter of 1981 we boarded a plane and headed to the Morong Bataan refugee processing center near Manila, the capital of the Philippines. After getting off the plane, we rode a crowded bus to the camp. The winding, bumpy road caused us all to feel nauseous, and many people were throwing up. Of course, we knew this was literally our road to freedom. In fact, it felt like an amazing breath of fresh air after years of feeling surrounded by hopelessness and death back in Cambodia and Thailand.

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We lived in the Philippines for six months, and during that time I was able to go to a local school for refugee children. Life felt more stable and predictable than before, and I began making new friends. As children, we enjoyed life in this new country without fully realizing our predicament.

While I was there, I met another Cambodian boy who was about my age. We soon became friends and would hang out often and enjoyed playing together. I would come and visit his family's simple home, and they would invite me to have meals with them. Having this stable friendship with this boy and his family helped make me feel secure and established in the community.

It didn't seem so hard to be a refugee in the Philippines. One afternoon when my family and I were napping I got up and found that the door was locked. But to my surprise the door was so thin that I was able to bend it and sneak out of the house without my parents' knowledge. I went to the place where food was being cooked. I was hungry, and I sat there and ate a pot of rice by myself. I was happy and full.

## LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA: HOME AWAY FROM HOME

In the summer of 1982, our family flew to the Los Angeles International Airport. My aunt was supposed to pick us up, but she had the wrong information about our flight and arrival time. After a few hours of waiting at the airport, our sponsor agency took us to the refugee settlement project area in Santa Ana, California. We stayed there for a week until my aunt was able to locate our whereabouts and take us to their one-bedroom apartment. My aunt and uncle had a handful of their own children living in the apartment. It was a tight squeeze, but it was our temporary home away from home.

My first months in America were quite overwhelming. I didn't speak the language and I couldn't understand what was happening around me, be it the busy streets and stores or the unfamiliar music and TV shows. Southeast Asians no longer surrounded me or anything I was accustomed to outside of home. My most vivid memory of American culture was listening to Michael Jackson's albums and learning English by watching *Sesame Street*.

My father was able to find work at Jack in the Box (a burger restaurant) and a donut shop. Once we had enough money saved, we moved to our own little place and bought our first car, a 1981 white Oldsmobile.

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