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The Worst of times

By JUSTIN WINTLE

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**WHEN BROKEN GLASS FLOATS:
Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge
By Chanrithy Him**

Norton £16.95 pp330

In the 20th-century madhouse, nowhere was madder than Cambodia. The regime instituted by Pol Pot after the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge in April 1975 ranks as one of the most callous ever. It is estimated that between a fifth and a third of the population died in gruesome circumstances in three years.

The term genocide, widely applied to what happened, is a misnomer. While Cambodia's Muslim minority was all but wiped out, the main thrust of Pol Pot's savagery was directed at his own kind. The operative distinctions were socioeconomic and political, not ethnic. Cambodians were segregated into "new" and "old" people. The later consisted of the rural peasantry, the former of virtually everyone else, but especially those city-dwellers perceived by the Khmer Rouge to have supported the toppled pro-American government of Lon Nol.

Cambodia, therefore, was essentially different from what has subsequently happened in the Balkans, Eritrea or Rwanda. To the historian this presents a conundrum. The ideology of the Khmer Rouge was a tangled mishmash of local atavism and exogenous theorems that had their origins in the West. And if the immediate cause of the conflagration was the widening of the war in Vietnam, the West again was heavily implicated. As the Vietcong built jungle bases deep inside Cambodian territory, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger responded with a bombing campaign that was as murderously indiscriminate as it was clandestine.

This was the true and also truly genocidal beginning of the holocaust for Cambodia's luckless civilians. If Nixon now lies securely in his grave, Kissinger, in the wake of Pinochet, must betimes turn in his sleep. Yet ironically, for Cambodia's persecuted, America remained an iconic paradise. For a lucky few, heedless of the deceptions of contemporary geopolitics, a refugee camp in Thailand was the first stop en route for Florida, California or some other Shangri-la.

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Chanrithy Him belongs to this group. Born in 1965 to a well-off Lon Lolist family, she found her childhood poleaxed in midstream. Her father was executed immediately after the takeover, and she and her family were subjected to every labour camps, and regularly moved around, one by one her mother and nine siblings fell ill. By 1978, when the Khmer Rouge themselves were toppled, only five were left.

It is by any standard a harrowing tale, simply but effectively recounted. Inevitably it is the details that stick in the mind. The central death is that of Him's mother, carted off to a Khmer Rouge "hospital" that is no more than an abandoned barn. To feed herself, Him's mother devised a way of catching nighttime mice on the floor beside her. In another appalling episode Him tells how, plagued by malaria and edema, her own eyes were festering. To cure them she used her urine as antibiotic eye-drops.

So it goes on, a moving and equal addition to such classics of Cambodian witness literature as Pin Yathay's *Stay Alive, My Son*, the more so perhaps as it tells a by-now familiar story from a female viewpoint.

Such books should perhaps be read by everyone, especially "young offenders," to give them some idea of the precariousness of civil society. But there is a little more to the story than that. Him seems well assimilated in her adopted country. Indeed, in Oregon she works with post-traumatic stress disorder programme for other Cambodians. Far more than previous accounts, hers projects a full panoply of American values, down to and including personal goal orientation.

Her narrative, though, stops short of her arrival in America. In a camp in the Philippines, she has her fortune told. The first reading says she is "going to hell." Only when she concentrates her mind do the auspices yield a happier prognosis. Given Him's talents as a personal chronicler, it would be rewarding to read a sequel. As a human being she has endured the worst; as a writer another challenge lies ahead.

~Justin Wintle - London Sunday Times