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# Peace Between Banyan and Kapok Trees: Untangling Cambodia through Thavory Huot's Life Story

By Ozlem Ezer, Peace Writer

Edited by Emiko Noma



2005 Women PeaceMakers Program

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JOAN B. KROC  
INSTITUTE FOR  
PEACE & JUSTICE  
UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice  
Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies  
University of San Diego  
5998 Alcalá Park  
San Diego, CA 92110-2492  
<http://peace.sandiego.edu>

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## **ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM**

Made possible through a generous grant from the Fred J. Hansen Foundation, the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights – as generally there is no time, or, perhaps, no formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories. Selected peacemakers join the IPJ for an eight-week residency.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. The peacemakers' stories are also documented on film by the IPJ's partner organization Sun & Moon Vision Productions. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women – those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation – must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.<sup>1</sup>

**BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER –  
THAVORY HUOT**

A survivor of three decades of civil war, genocide and domestic violence, Thavory Huot, from Phnom Penh, Cambodia, is currently the executive director of the Khmer Ahimsa Organization (KAH), which works to empower communities with conflict resolution skills through informal village structures. Prior to this, she was affiliated with Brahmavihara, the Cambodia AIDS Project, and has been program manager of the Peace Education and Awareness Unit of the Working Group for Weapons Reduction. The group works to reduce weapons; promote peace and non-violent problem solving; and strengthen the capacity of high school teachers, pedagogical trainers, teachers-in-training and Cambodian civil society to build a peaceful and safe country.

In the 1970s, Huot witnessed the death of most of her family under the Khmer Rouge. During those years, she was forced into manual labor, building dams and irrigation channels, and transplanting, plowing and harvesting rice. After the Vietnamese invasion in 1979, Huot survived by teaching in exchange for food for almost a decade. In the 1990s, she became the project coordinator of the Buddhist Association of Nuns and Lay Women, where she worked to empower women on national reconciliation and heal the wounds of many years of war and genocide.

Domestic violence, including assaults with a deadly weapon, is common following years of conflict, and Huot has worked in various projects against such violence since 1998. She is the mother of three adult children, two of her own and an adopted nephew, all of whom she says serve as inspiration for her tireless efforts to make peace in her scarred country. She states, “I would never want my children to suffer the way I did.”

## **NARRATIVE STORIES**

### **Introduction**

Banyan trees grow throughout Cambodia. They may reach a height of over 100 feet and as they grow, new roots descend from their branches, pushing into the ground and forming new trunks. The roots grow persistently. A single banyan tree might have dozens of trunks. It often becomes impossible to tell which trunk is the original as time passes.

To understand Cambodia in the present, it is necessary to look at Cambodia in the past and its people. Thavory Huot's life story is one of these thousand stories. It is a story of survival. Having witnessed the genocide in her country, her engagement with peace and conflict resolution as an educator is profound.

There are two Cambodias in Thavory's heart and mind. One is related to the dark side of human nature, which ruined the natural world – both people and the environment – for the decades between 1970 and 1990. The other is a peaceful and bountiful natural world, symbolized by her grandfather's fertile garden. Education, Buddhism, family and determination have been Thavory's driving forces in life. Her story is also about recovery; it is about a continuous search for peace both within herself and for Cambodia.

### Planting the First Seeds of Peace

It was not always about the civil wars and genocide. In the late 1950s, children in Cambodia had peaceful and joyful moments – memories they could pass on to future generations. Thavory Huot was born in 1953, the same year Cambodia gained its independence from France. The new name for the country, Kingdom of Cambodia, was celebrated nearly the same time Thavory's parents celebrated the arrival of their first baby: Thavory, or “strong girl” in Khmer.

Thavory's earliest memories are of playing in unending green rice paddies. Big kapok, guava and mango trees offered perfect places for children to play and climb. She took regular visits to the pagoda with her grandparents. “We used to have many crows all over our garden. My grandmother assigned some of us as the ‘guardians’ of dried fish lying under the sun in the open, or else crows would have eaten it.”<sup>2</sup> Despite preying on the dried fish, crows were symbols of peace in Cambodia.

Moved by these childhood memories, Thavory later had a desire to write children's books. One of her stories is entitled *Waiting for the Return of the Crows*.<sup>3</sup> She remembers many fairytales and stories she grew up with, mostly related to animals, temples and Buddha. Since her grandparents were devout Buddhists, the circulating stories always had moral lessons. Thavory never got tired of hearing “Golden Fish” and “the Crocodile and the Carter.”<sup>4</sup>

Although Thavory's favorite person in the family circle was her grandfather, she had great respect for her grandmother and other relatives. “Respecting the elderly is one of the most important characteristics of Cambodian culture. It doesn't matter what your elders tell you, whether it is upsetting or insulting, one should never talk back.” Thavory often played tricks on her grandmother, a very traditional woman who encouraged Thavory to do housework all the time. The young granddaughter would pretend she couldn't hear her grandmother's calls from the kitchen while she was hiding in her grandfather's reading room, her favorite spot in the whole house.

Thavory's grandfather was of Chinese descent, an educated man. Chinese merchants in Cambodia lived mainly in urban centers and played “middlemen” in the economic structure. However, the Chinese in Cambodia wanted to preserve differences in their social and cultural institutions, one reason Thavory's grandfather wanted to send her to a private Chinese school so she could learn the language and culture. He was a wealthy man and offered to pay for the tuition. But Thavory's mother opposed the idea, wanting her daughter to become a civil servant like Thavory's father. As such, Thavory could make a steady and safe living, getting regular paychecks.

Her grandfather, however, encouraged Thavory to become a businesswoman. In rural Cambodia, the Chinese were moneylenders and wielded considerable economic power over the ethnic Khmer peasants through usury. When Thavory was young, the peasants often came to borrow money from them. After the harvest, the peasants paid off their loans with baskets of rice.

When Thavory's grandparents first arrived in Cambodia, like many other Chinese they were very poor. But they were hard-working people and by the time Thavory was 4 years old, her grandfather had managed to build a big house with a large garden. Thavory loved playing in this garden with her cousins and neighboring children. It was full of different kinds of vegetables and fruit trees – coconut, banana and mango. Her grandfather worked tirelessly in the garden. He was an old man, but kept himself busy all the time. Thavory wanted to be just like him and tried to read all

the books he had. He was the only educated person in the family and very active in the community as a member of the local Chinese association, a traditional community support group for the Chinese minority. They performed many functions, including collecting money for families who could not afford funerals when a loved one passed away, and lending money without interest to its members. They also brought the traditional Chinese theater to their village to perform plays every year.

Thavory was a playful child – “Even fetching water was a game for me!” One of her favorite games was hide-and-seek. A favorite place to play was the large shed where Thavory’s family kept their sacks of rice – sometimes up to 100 of them. The children wanted to hide themselves in the most secret spots among the sacks where nobody could find them.

They had no servants or cooks in the house, but sometimes Thavory’s cousins spent the summers there learning household duties, such as cooking, cleaning and sewing. This time was part of a particular Cambodian ritual for girls known as *choul mloup*, which literally means “entering the shade.” It takes place during the onset of menstruation and is considered a time to transmit knowledge about the proper relations between and roles for the sexes.<sup>5</sup>

Thavory learned the importance of having a family network, especially the presence of elders in the family during her formative years. Although her parents divorced when Thavory was 4 years old, she did not lack a father figure, thanks to her grandfather.

Before she started public school, Thavory spent almost a year at a nearby pagoda where her cousins were receiving their religious education. She was only 4 and too young to attend school, but the Buddhist monk, their teacher, did not say anything. Thavory’s grandfather held a prestigious position in the local religious community, known as the “pagoda committee.” However, this family link could not save her from the rattan stick of the monk – punishment for sleeping in class, saliva dribbling from one side of her mouth. But she still returned to school day after day. Whenever she felt herself falling asleep, she dropped something between the cracks of the floor, which fell to the ground below. She then asked permission from the monk to go outside to pick it up. Once outside she would splash water on her face to wake herself up. “I had such an endless curiosity of my surroundings. I always wanted to read and learn things, even at an early age.” In the pagoda, she did not learn how to read, but how to chant – an important religious practice.

Later, Thavory was sent to public school. It was not captivating for her curious mind, but she did well in school, becoming the best student in her class by 1969 – the year the United States started bombing the country. Thavory was 16.

The U.S. began the bombing operations to destroy the bases and installations of Vietnamese communist soldiers and guerillas who had sheltered inside Cambodia’s borders. But the U.S. kept the bombings secret until 1970 when Richard Nixon’s administration ordered an invasion into Cambodia. The bombings – which made little distinction between communist bases and civilian villages – continued until 1973.

No one in the region Thavory lived in had any experience with the U.S.-style “high-tech war.” To protect themselves, the villagers dug ditches, but those provided little protection. Early in the bombing campaign, Thavory was taking a bath in the river with her friend Kim Luon. Their

laughter and cries of joy were disrupted by three warplanes circling above them. Kim Luon suggested to Thavory that they hide behind the closest boat in the river. Thavory refused and decided to run home as fast as she could. Kim Luon followed. They reached the village and ran to the trenches where the other villagers were hiding. Thavory was breathing heavily and making offerings in her mind to Buddha, thinking she would be killed for sure. She was frightened and cried inside the trench: “Buddha, please help me, please. I will shave my head, I’ll do anything, please.”

The people next to her told her to be quiet: “Hush, you silly girl, the planes can hear you; don’t put others’ lives at risk!” Thavory stopped crying immediately. If these machines could fly and see them from such long distances, they could hear her voice, too.

Later that day, the villagers went to the riverside to check the damage. They found the body of a peasant right next to where the boats were docked. Thavory’s instincts had saved her and her friend’s life.

After the bombings ended for the day, Thavory’s mother and grandparents decided to move to a different place they thought was safer. They borrowed an oxcart from a cousin and moved the next day. They built a small hut in an empty spot near a pond and became the first family to found a new village in the vicinity that was later named *Trapaing Phlous*, or “two ponds.”

But life in the new village was disrupted by the violence of the civil war that had begun between the Cambodian army and the North Vietnamese guerillas.<sup>6</sup> Thavory witnessed battles between the communists and the Cambodian forces, and also between villagers and the North Vietnamese guerillas. During this time, Thavory would rearrange the dried fish on the ground in their backyard, but there weren’t any crows. She thought, “They must have gone to some peaceful lands. I wish I could fly away like them.”

### The Jungle and the City

Enraged by the damage of the U.S. bombings in the village, Thavory made up her mind to join the revolutionary communist groups, as many other villagers were doing. But during her indoctrination, she realized their ideas were pure propaganda. This underground education she received in the jungle was nothing like the education she had pictured. She wanted to learn about other cultures and countries and learn foreign languages. Instead, Thavory and her female “comrades” were trained as the advocates of the revolution.

Thavory was taught by an ex-classmate who had received low grades in school before it was closed down. Though not qualified to teach, he became group leader because he had joined the Khmer Rouge earlier than the others.

As part of their training, Thavory and the other young girls from her village learned Chinese folk dances and sang songs to the neighboring villagers – songs with lyrics that lamented the extreme poverty and American imperialism. The 10 young girls performed for anonymous villagers at night, a practice traditionally seen as immoral. When it was done in the name of the political party, however, it was accepted and even honored. She could not have imagined herself dancing for strangers otherwise.

In the mornings, Thavory helped her family with household duties, catching fish and husking and grinding rice. It was the dry season. In the afternoons, she was free to join the “training.” In addition to learning Chinese folk dances, she listened to the group leader give talks about the history of peasantry. They were told that the government system had exploited peasants for centuries. This vicious circle that imprisoned the peasants at the lowest rung of society was unlikely to change unless they revolted against those who used them to get rich.

As a communist revolutionary, Thavory grew more pessimistic every day and did not like the life she was leading. The traumatic effects of the U.S. bombings still haunted her and she thought they could start again at any moment. She felt anxious all the time and eventually could not work at all. Her comrades in the revolutionary group were annoyed because they had to help Thavory in whatever task she was assigned to. She felt weak. Her mind made her body sick.

Thavory’s mother thought someone had put a spell on her and called the traditional healer of the village. “My mother thought that it was possibly her second cousin who wanted to get married to me, but he knew that our family would not accept.” The healer brought her a belt that would keep the evil eye or magic away from Thavory. He also pounded some roots and seeds in a mortar and boiled them. Thavory drank it and stayed in bed until she felt better.

The illness was the end of Thavory’s training in the jungle. Her family did not react to her decision not to return to the training. She kept helping with the housework and went to town from time to time to sell vegetables. But the schools had closed and she had lost her circle of friends when many moved to live in a new place. She was often too afraid to leave the house.

One day, a cousin of Thavory’s father came to the village. The Cambodian forces had gained power against the communists so the roads were open again and he was allowed to travel. He went first to his native village, wanting to check if his house was still there. But it wasn’t. He then went to

visit Thavory and her family. When they were alone, he told her that her father wanted her to move to Phnom Penh to study. “I had not seen my father for years. It would be my second time to meet him since I was a small child. I accepted his invitation. Education was the most important thing for me at the time.” However, she did not tell her mother about the invitation – the family thought Thavory was going to Phnom Penh with her father’s cousin to buy some medicine for her grandparents.

The journey to Phnom Penh lasted a full day, although the capital city was only 90 miles away. The Khmer Rouge had blocked all the main roads, so they took secondary roads to reach Thavory’s father’s house.

Our first meeting was exciting. We had dinner together. He introduced me to my stepmother and my five half-siblings. But I was soon to become some version of Cinderella. The next thing I knew, I had to clean up the whole house, fetch water and take care of my half-siblings. They were much younger than I was.

Despite the poor treatment she received at her father’s home, her first months in high school in Phnom Penh were exciting. “We had many surprise parties. We were a mixed group, so I had a chance to meet different people. I was not very homesick.” But she still had nightmares sometimes. She had a recurring dream that her half-sister in the village chided her for forgetting them all: *Thavory, you do not miss us, you have a new life over there.* Thavory tried to assure her in her dream that she had not forgotten anyone. “I used to wake up crying. Then I burnt incense and asked for forgiveness.”

For the first two years, Thavory had no contact with her mother or anyone from her mother’s family. The Khmer Rouge was gaining power in the rural areas and more roads were blocked. It was very dangerous to travel.

One day, a customer of Thavory’s mother came to the capital with a group of friends. She had good relations with the Khmer Rouge in her village, so she was able to travel to the city without encountering any problems. She brought Thavory a letter from her mother. It was the first letter in two years. Thavory opened the letter with shaky hands: *Dear Thavory, I miss you a lot. We all miss you. Please come back to your house. You can travel back safely with the lady who brought you this letter. Mom.*

Thavory had tears in her eyes. She missed them, too. Life was not easy in the city. She had fluctuating emotions. One day she was fine and the next she was having nightmares. The pocket money her father was giving her was not enough to buy breakfast. After some consideration, she told the woman who brought the letter that she would join her on her return trip to the village.

However, the woman’s response confused Thavory. She told Thavory that it would be better to stay in the city and continue her studies. The violence in the district was increasing and the threats of the U.S. bombs continued. “If you leave your education now, it will be so hard for you to go back to it in the future,” she warned. “Think twice, but of course you are welcome to join me if you really want to.”

Thavory decided to consult some other acquaintances. They all advised her to stay in the city and bear the situation at her father's house. Thavory's reply to her mother's letter was a very difficult one to write:

*Dear Mom, I miss you so much, too. I dream of you and I wake up crying at nights. I have no peace in my father's family. However, I want to become a civil servant, so I need to complete my education for my future. I send you all my love. Your daughter, Thavory.*

Thavory's stay in Phnom Penh lasted almost four years: three years of high school and six months at the university. Then, her whole world turned upside down. One of the worst human tragedies of the last century was about to begin.

### On the Move and Staying Alive

Thavory was a 21-year-old student at the Faculty of Pedagogy in Phnom Penh when the Khmer Rouge took over the capital city in April 1975. The victorious soldiers forced the city population out under the pretense that the U.S. was going to bomb the city. In many cases, entire families were given only 10 minutes to pack. They were told that it would only be a three-day journey. The same scenario was played out in nearly all of the country's major cities and towns.<sup>7</sup>

After the soldiers took over and they were celebrating in the capital, Thavory talked with a Khmer Rouge soldier on the street. He told her that the news about the U.S. bombing was not entirely true and advised her to take good care of herself. Thavory went back home and told her father, stepmother and their five children that they should pack all the valuable things they had. The announced forced journey was likely to last more than three days. The family's plan, however, was to cross the Thai border and live there until things returned to normal.

The first village they were sent to was a barren one, high up on a hill where Thavory's father was assigned to build a hut. They realized it would be impossible to sustain a family there because the land was extremely dry. There was no water for irrigation, so growing vegetables was not an option – but neither was there wild vegetation for people to eat. Having neither agricultural skills nor physical strength for building a hut, Thavory's father was very worried; the family decided to put their escape plan into action immediately.

Thavory's family left the village one day at 4 in the morning and walked without any break for hours under the scorching sunlight, toward the Thai border. Around noon, they were stopped by Khmer Rouge forces, who redirected them to another village. Thavory was pushing all the family belongings in a cart, but just as they were stopped by the soldiers one of the wheels broke, a "divine intervention of Buddha." Thavory's father told the soldiers that once they fixed the wheel they would go to the village. The soldiers did not follow them.<sup>8</sup> Only the national highways were controlled, so taking the secondary roads made it easier for the family to plot its own route.

Thousands of people died during the evacuation from the city. Thavory and her family passed swollen corpses lying on the ground. Some had been dead for days. Some had died just a few hours before Thavory walked by.

Despite their plan, Thavory and her family were forced to return to their village later that day, unable to escape to the Thai border. They swore to one another they would not tell anyone, under any circumstances, of their attempt to escape. Although some of the villagers were very curious about what was going on, nobody could get Thavory's family to talk about the experience. Thavory's father and stepmother decided they should head toward Baray district where his native village was located. There they could find a place to live and people who could support them.

Thavory's secret plan was to go back to Phnom Penh regardless of her family's destination. When she first moved to the city, she realized she wanted to become a pharmacist. Before that, she had wanted to become a teacher. In either case, she had to go back for more education. She would not waste her time wandering from one village to another. She did not disclose this to anyone and pretended to go along with her family's decision.

As she traveled along with her family, walking miles from one village to another for a month, she managed to talk to other people she met on the road and gathered as much information as she could. It was a challenging time, as Thavory had to push the cart full of family belongings and take care of her half-siblings. Her stepmother took little responsibility and paid no attention to Thavory, who lagged behind the others because of the heavy load she pushed.

When Thavory felt she was no longer able to keep up with her family or push the cart, she fell behind and eventually decided to hitchhike. She saw a truck that belonged to the Khmer Rouge and waved for it to stop. She was so shocked when it did stop that she was unable to pull herself up into it. The passengers in the back reached down and helped her in. Once inside, she was also surprised to find neighbors from her mother's village in the truck, their faces looking "very sad and concerned." Thavory tried to speak with some of them, but many were reluctant to talk to her. Some pretended not to know her. She got enough information to learn their fears: They had no idea where the journey would end.

As the truck started moving again, within less than 300 feet Thavory saw her father, stepmother and their children standing next to three Khmer Rouge soldiers who waved at the truck to stop. Thavory's father and his wife put their children in Thavory's care and promised to meet in Baray district.

She and her half-siblings had to change trucks three times in one day. Cholera was a spreading threat in many villages; in the second village where they left the truck and considered spending the night, many cases were reported. Another ride was necessary before it got dark. An oxcart approached them and the man offered a ride, but not for free. He asked Thavory for two skirts and a man's shirt. Thavory agreed and they finally arrived at a safer village.

In the village, Thavory began talking to a woman from the city. She tried to create a different persona in all her interactions with Khmer Rouge officials and strangers, hoping they would think she was an educated person and then offer her a job in the city. She did not know yet that such an endeavor could lead to her own death. Peasants were the Khmer Rouge ideal and seen as simple, uneducated, hard-working and not prone to exploiting others. Their way of life had not changed for centuries, so the Khmer Rouge referred to them as the "old people." The city dwellers of Phnom Penh and urban areas, on the other hand, were seen as the "new people" and tainted by Western capitalist ideas. They were to be killed.

But in her naiveté, Thavory replied untruthfully to the questions from the woman in the village and told her she was working at a bank in Phnom Penh. Thavory pointed at her half-siblings and said they were her children.<sup>9</sup>

Thavory could not tell if the city-woman believed her story or not, but she warned Thavory that she should never, under any circumstances, disclose the fact she was an educated woman.

Thavory's father and stepmother eventually met up with her and the other children. When it was clear they could not make it to Thailand, Thavory begged her father not to go to his native village. People would recognize them and report their background – educated and multilingual – to the Khmer Rouge. "My father was distraught with the whole disruption of his life and the victory of

the Khmer Rouge. He paid no attention to my warnings. He was also heavily influenced by his new wife. His mother owned property in Baray district and he wanted to live with his family.”

Since the dream of returning to Phnom Penh and continuing her education was no longer feasible, all Thavory wanted to do was to leave her father’s family. “It was such a confusing time for me. Maybe it was Buddha’s spirit that kept me alive and insisted that I should return to my mom.”

Thavory arrived in Baray district before her father and stepmother, but she made sure to hand her half-siblings over to her father’s relatives. She told them that she might visit her mother before she joined the family again. Unlike the beginning of the takeover in April 1975, by this time the Khmer Rouge had become extremely vigilant in recording and keeping track of the movements of families and individuals. Thavory managed to avoid detection in her father’s village by taking a different path than the one that led to the registration spot when registration day came.

A native of the village and the son of an acquaintance of Thavory’s mother, Weng, helped Thavory to escape her father’s village. She left most of her belongings behind and got on a bicycle with Weng, headed for her mother’s home. When she arrived in the village, Thavory had to ask for permission from the head of the village to reside with her mother. She had to prove that she belonged to the “old people.”

The first moments with her mother were not the grand welcome she was expecting. She told her daughter she did not love her anymore and that she looked like an American imperialist. She also made degrading comments about Thavory’s accessories. “She touched my necklace and earrings and asked, ‘What are those things?’ I got very upset and cried a lot in front of Weng. I was not prepared for such a cold welcome after what I had been through.”

It was only after Weng left when her mother hugged her and said, “I did not mean a word I said. Because you arrived at my door with a soldier accompanying you, I had to treat you that way. Now, please come in and live with me.” She told Thavory that people from the city were getting killed. According to the new regulations of the Khmer Rouge, the list included students.

But Thavory was confused and did not find her mother’s explanation sincere. She was so distraught, she thought coming to the village was a mistake and that she should go back to her father. “It was one of the most confusing days of my life. I felt torn between my parents. It was so hard to predict which place would be a better one for my future.” She went back to Weng, who was still outside, and told him she wanted to go back to her father. Weng, having served within the Khmer Rouge system, tried to convince Thavory she should stay with her mother. Thavory shook her head in confusion and asked him for a ride back. She was unaware she was not only choosing between her parents, but also swinging between life and death.

It started to rain on the way back, getting heavier and heavier as they pedaled along. Weng stopped when they finally came across a sheltering mango tree. As they chatted and waited for the rain to pass, Weng suddenly embraced Thavory and kissed her. Thavory shied away, her face flushing as she worried about her reputation: “Why did you do that? That is not appropriate!” Weng told her the Khmer Rouge had forbidden having any personal and physical contact with women, but he had been wondering for a long time what it was like to kiss a girl.

Her father and stepmother were bewildered when Thavory returned to the village. Her stepmother searched through Thavory's bag, suspecting she took something from the family belongings. It became clear once again that Thavory would have a hard time here. She would be the servant of the family again and all five children would depend on her. "My stepmother never appreciated my help. I could see that I would be working in the fields and doing all the housework. After she searched my bag, I told myself once again that I was in the wrong place." She decided to leave yet again.

Before she left, her father asked to speak with her, suspecting it could be the last time they would see each other. "Thavory, please complete your education first. One day you will fall in love and want to get married. But before that day comes, finish your education. If you get a degree, you can make a living without being dependent on anybody. Your future children will also respect you more if you do so."

They both knew this was the last wish of a father – and his farewell. Still, Thavory asked, "Why are you telling me such things *now*? I am not going to get married." She said goodbye.

Her father's village was full of people with different backgrounds and had a rare freedom compared to other villages. The variety of people living there implied that everyone was welcome; people felt free to express themselves. They could sing, dance and display their cultural skills. No one knew their freedom was actually a Khmer Rouge tactic to infiltrate this village. They had been monitoring the village to see who could be classified as a "new person." When their background check was completed, Thavory's father, stepmother and half-siblings were reportedly killed by the Khmer Rouge.

But Thavory was unaware of this, living in her mother's village with her mother, stepfather and their children. Fortunately, her relationship with her stepfather was very different than her relationship with her stepmother, and the two got along well. But he failed to explain the political situation well to Thavory when she moved back. He was vague as he described the plans of the Khmer Rouge, perhaps thinking Thavory was too young to know certain things from an adult perspective. "He told me that I needed to learn how to work in the fields. He told me to wear torn, old and dirty clothes at all times, and to get rid of my accessories."

Her stepfather was forced to work in the logistics division of the village, organizing the food distribution. Just three months after Thavory reunited with her mother's family, her stepfather got sick and was given the wrong injection of medicine. He died not long after.

Some time after Thavory returned to her mother's village, her mother sent her a message to meet in the rice paddies to talk. She told Thavory to pray because she was not sure if she could save Thavory's life. "Thavory, take refuge in Buddha, please pray every night." But Thavory was not good at praying and couldn't remember how to chant.

Her mother said, "It is OK. It is not about the complexity or length of the prayer that will save you. Even the very basic is fine. Repeating the name of Buddha will help you."

After talking to her mother in the field that day, Thavory prayed in bed every night. "I used to hear the names of the people I was living and working with being called at nights. They

disappeared. We never heard from them again, but nobody dared to ask the officers what happened to them.”

### Forced Labor

A couple of days after Thavory lost her stepfather, her mother's cousin (the team leader of the Khmer Rouge youth) asked Thavory to cook for an informal gathering of officers. Thavory accepted his request and proved to be a good cook for the officers. Under Pol Pot's program, high-level cooperatives were formed throughout the country in accordance with the idea of communal eating. People were not allowed to cook at home. Seated together at long tables sheltered under thatch roofs, all the villagers ate together. Later, Thavory was asked to be the cook of the village, her first official position. She was fortunate to have enough food for herself in the village, but this lasted only two months. She was then sent to another village – by this point, villages were labor camps run by the Khmer Rouge – to work as a cook and laborer. Her task, with dozens of others, was to build an irrigation channel.

Every day, the village leader walked to the village square and delivered a speech. On the surface, society was strictly egalitarian, so his speech would be full of such notions. “Hello comrades! Now we are one class, one group in this country, we are all equals.” It was all a façade. He repeated everything many times. For Thavory, the daily speech of the village leader was like a poem students are forced to memorize in school and cannot forget later. After the speech, names were read out of the people who were going to be sent to “contribute” to projects elsewhere. People were simply the *opokar*, or the “instruments” of the Angkar.<sup>10</sup>

Thavory says people were encouraged to call each other *mit* or *met*, “friend” or “comrade.” The Khmer Rouge invented new terms to transform the language.<sup>11</sup> People were told they must “forge” (*lot dam*) a new revolutionary character. Any nostalgia for pre-revolutionary times (*choeu sttak aram*, or “memory sickness”) could result in their receiving Angkar's “invitation” – which meant death.

It was very hot the day Thavory was sent to a new village to work on the irrigation channel project. She and her comrades filled their handmade backpacks with a set of clothes and a small bottle of salt. Thavory saw her mother's cousin not far from her, trying to walk barefoot. She could read the pain on his face. She felt desperate not being able to help him. She watched him try to step on the grass from time to time to cool his feet from the asphalt road. “How could they expect us to ‘contribute’ to their projects, when we walked with empty stomachs and no sandals?”

They finally arrived at the village and were shown the place to sleep, a pagoda. Thavory immediately recognized it: the pagoda her grandparents used to visit for prayers and offerings. It brought joyful childhood memories to Thavory, but she kept them all to herself. “If not I would be diagnosed with *choeu sttak aram*.” She longed for pre-revolutionary times. She wanted to be the child who had played hide-and-seek among the rice sacks in grandpa's barn. She tried not to think of the present and crawled in a small corner of the pagoda to sleep and pray for better days.



“It is not the time for transplanting rice,” Thavory murmured to herself as she was gazing at her rough and wrinkled-looking hands. Her hands looked older than her whole body. From dawn to dusk, it was only her hands that did the work. Her brain, so eager and thirsty for knowledge, was not

allowed to work – or so the Khmer Rouge demanded. But Thavory was seeding plans of escape in her mind.

She also felt lonely and hungry, yet she knew that Yen, her only true friend in the labor camp, would be next to her whenever she needed. Yen, disguised by the deities like a tiny Cambodian girl, was the one who could carry bags of seeds on her petite shoulders, who could confront her hunger bravely and beat so many sleepless nights. How they became best friends, Thavory didn't know. They both shared the passion to stay alive. That must have been it.

In the fields, Thavory felt dizzy and shut her eyes. She realized it was lunch time and that she had not looked up to the sky in a while to stretch her back and neck, which were aching. She wanted to tell something to Yen, but couldn't form the words.

When Thavory opened her eyes, she saw Yen standing next to her with some rice in a bowl. The smell of boiled rice made her feel at home. She could almost hear the click-clacks of her mother's sewing machine. She gathered her strength to swallow the rice Yen brought. It was important not to make a scene, not to draw attention to herself in the fields. She tried not to think of the irony that they were all on the edge of starvation while seeding rice to the belly of the earth. For a moment, she secretly wished she could transform into a green rice plant that gently bowed under the scythe.

The constitution of the country under the Khmer Rouge banned Buddhism, but Thavory practiced it with every breath she took. "Budh-haa ... Budh-haa ..." She repeated it several times the way her grandparents taught her to pray when she was a small child. One thing the regime could not tear away from her was her inner power. Thavory healed herself several times through meditation. "Through meditation, you can figure out the problems that occupy your mind. Mostly it is those problems that result in physical problems that weaken your body."

Thavory was a witness to some devastating moments in the labor camps. One day, her friend Yen's 12-year-old nephew was extremely thirsty. "It was the hottest day of the dry season – or at least we all felt that way." Yen's nephew craved water so desperately he jumped into the ice-cold river. His vulnerable body could not handle the temperature shock and he died of a heart attack. "The only thing that kept me sane that day was the fact that he died in the cold river, possibly enjoying some seconds of what he had been craving so badly."

One day there was a closing meeting of the irrigation channel construction. The officer in charge woke everyone up at 3 in the morning. This was a special gathering, with participants from several other villages in the district.

Thavory tried hard to keep herself awake. In the dark, laborers looked like "a group of skinny ghosts." Thavory was startled when a stranger quietly approached her and asked, "Hey Thavory, how is it going? Where have you been?" She looked at the person with suspicious eyes and tried to figure out who she was. The stranger frowned with disappointment and sorrow. Then the ghost-face whispered her name to Thavory. It was her stepmother. Two years had passed since Thavory learned her father and step-family were killed. But somehow she and her children had "survived my father. However, I could not recognize her." Thavory kept staring at her. She had become extremely thin. "She was a big and strong woman once. What was leftover from her old self

looked like one-third of my stepmother. I simply could not believe my eyes. But, who knows what I looked like?”

They could not display any signs of endearment, but they talked a little bit more. “She told me that her children missed me and always asked where I was. Then she invited me to their village for a visit.” But Thavory knew that the head of their village was a very cruel person. If she were caught, she would be punished severely. She decided it was too risky to go.

After the closing meeting of the irrigation channel project, Thavory was assigned to a new labor camp where conditions were not as bad as some of the others. Each camp had a different system, especially in regard to its accommodation. Sometimes people spent the nights in a pagoda; sometimes they lived with the families of the village. There were times when they slept in make-shift tents, which was akin to living in the open air. Because the roof of the tent was made of leaves, it was not very protective. Sometimes Thavory and her comrades woke up and saw no roof above them. Leaves dried fast during the dry season and flew off while they were sleeping.

Thavory knew the village leader in the second forced labor camp she was sent to; his daughter was once the housekeeper for Thavory’s grandparents. One day, the leader called Thavory. He lent her a bicycle and told her to find his daughter and bring her back to the village. Using the safe roads, Thavory went to the labor camp where he thought his daughter might be. Once there, she met the cook and asked him some general questions about the circumstances of the people in the camp. The cook was surprised to hear that Thavory had no idea what had happened. “All the members of your stepmother’s family were killed,” he said. “The daughter of the village leader in the labor camp where you are serving now was also killed. I am sorry.” He also told Thavory that two of her half-brothers tried to escape, but the Khmer Rouge caught them and threw them into a well and were buried alive.

Thavory could not believe what she was hearing. She froze. “I was in a complete state of shock. I started to shake. I told him that I could not stay there for another second, even though he offered me some tea and fruit.” She jumped on the bike and started to ride back to the labor camp as fast as she could. “When I returned, I got sick. I was sweating and shaking. People asked me what was wrong. I told them I had malaria. I did not tell them the news I had just heard.”

### Pervasive Hunger

Democratic government and free press did not exist during the Khmer Rouge rule from 1975 to 1979 or during the following years of the Vietnamese communist system in Cambodia, 1979 to 1989. Most of the world had no idea about the varying levels of starvation in the country, nor did they have any access to detailed accounts and evidence of it.

Chronic malnutrition causes impaired vision, listlessness and a greatly increased susceptibility to disease and death. Severely malnourished people are unable to function at even a basic level.<sup>12</sup> During her forced work at the Khmer Rouge camps, malnutrition was Thavory's endless torture.

My hunger went to extremes that I could never have imagined. It seems that my bones, my muscles, my stomach and my mind united in their yearning for food. Although I was suffering from *sraing*<sup>13</sup> and knew that eating frogs and crabs would make it worse, I had to eat them in order to survive. If you had to make a decision between death and life, you also would have chosen the severe itching all over your body. Itching reminds you that you are still alive.

While working in the labor camps, finding food and water became her most important struggle. When she was chosen as a cook for her group of laborers, she had enough food to satiate hunger, but cooking was extra work in addition to one's daily manual labor.

It was during the changing seasons that the Khmer Rouge devised its most insidious means of group torture. They had begun selling rice in exchange for arms and to meet the growing demands on rice production, they made the people work extreme hours. The laborers were given the smallest amount of food during the rainy season, when they were forced to work in the fields for 12 hours a day and they needed energy the most. During the dry season when it was too hot to want to eat, they were given plenty of rice. When there was extra rice, they managed to share with their friends from other camps who were living in worse conditions. If they could not share, the rice was wasted. But even this sharing was devised and monitored by the Khmer Rouge. Workers were allowed to visit each other during this time, but it was only a way for the Khmer Rouge to monitor the relationships between people of different camps and to decide who would be victims of their killing sessions. These short visits between the camps were only temporary; Angkar's orders would soon get stricter.

The daily "menu" during that time consisted of a tiny bowl of rice followed by a "horrible tasting" soup. It was boiled water with cactus and *prabok*.<sup>14</sup>

I wanted to curse the regime that made us starve like this in the midst of fertile rice paddies. I felt so angry. Of course, I had to repress my anger and instead dream of food: one mental picture after another until I thought that I felt full. It may sound crazy, but I felt full after picturing all this food. I could feel my mouth watering and I recommended it to my friends, too. That was our imaginary feast.

Thavory suffered from hunger for almost four years and only felt full beyond her imaginary feast on two occasions. One was a farewell party, just before she was moved to another camp: "We had soup with noodles; it was amazing, we felt so happy that night." The other occasion was thanks

to her friend who worked in a camp of “old people” at the time. They had chicken, rice, fruit and *prahok*. The banquet made Thavory suspicious at first and she feared for her life. She asked several questions before she accepted the invitation which, in her state of hunger, was hard to resist. Her suspicions were justified a short time later. That same friend was sent to a more hostile labor camp, probably due to some updated records on her family background.<sup>15</sup> Her whole family was killed.

Before the genocide, while living in her mother’s village before the move to Phnom Penh, Thavory had the opportunity to learn about different plants, harvest methods and growing cycles of the rice paddies. Her knowledge and love of nature saved her from starvation several times during the Khmer Rouge regime. “You are either dead by natural causes or killed by the soldiers if you fail to understand nature.” She remembers the stories of city-people who were ridiculed and killed just because they did not know how to distinguish between rice and wild grass and ruined some of the rice that was to be harvested. The city-people did not know what they could eat in nature during their forced marches between the work camps. In one of the camps, three girls died eating fried wild cereal they didn’t know was poisonous.

One of the side effects of endemic food deprivation is diarrhea. This left Thavory’s body weak and dehydrated. Accompanied by fever and vomiting, it was extremely dangerous and many people died this way. Often it was part of a starvation cycle: diarrhea increases the need to drink, but with only polluted, stagnant water available, it just caused more fever and vomiting. Boiling water was a luxury, though most people knew that it was the only way not to get sick. Many seemed to choose to get sick and die. “You can’t resist hunger or thirst. We ate anything we could find, be it a frog, grasshopper, fish, crab and all kinds of herbs and plants. We peasants carried salt with us, in our small handmade bags. Salt keeps your body from getting swollen, which not everyone knew at the time.”

Thavory experienced almost all the characteristic symptoms of starvation, which include the shrinkage of vital organs (such as the heart and lungs), chronic diarrhea, anemia, reduction in muscle mass and the accompanying weakness, low body temperature, irritability, immune deficiency and swelling from fluid under the skin. But she survived.

Thavory would see cows and buffaloes being raised for food, but only for consumption by the Angkar. The animals were tended by the elderly and children of the community. No private gardens were allowed for growing vegetables. Cattle were taken away from time to time, so they knew someone, somewhere, was enjoying their meat.

No formal trade or money exchange was allowed during the Khmer Rouge rule. If people were caught supplementing their diets with other food, they would be punished or even sent to be killed. Thavory once took a chance to fill her stomach with some food and managed to go unnoticed. She was on her way to the camp after a long day of harvesting and a village woman stopped her and asked if she had a sweater. Thavory remembered that she had a handmade pink sweater and told her yes. The woman said: “I will give you one chicken for that. What do you say?”

Thavory bargained, “Chicken and sugar cane.” The villager agreed. She told Thavory where her house was so Thavory could sneak in for the food.

On another occasion, Thavory attempted to fish with her bare hands.

It was the dry season, so fish had not much space to swim away, but it was still difficult. The water was up to our knees and I believe that it was Buddha's spirit that made the fish less slippery for my hands. What a day to remember! Almost two pounds of fish were caught and grilled with lots of salt! We all chatted and enjoyed ourselves that night.

### Motherhood

The Vietnamese were suddenly seen as saviors when they took power from the Khmer Rouge in 1979. The Cambodian people hoped that the darkest period in the nation's history had ended. Out of a population of 8 million, more than 2 million had died in just three-and-a-half years.<sup>16</sup> But the misery was not over.

For many Cambodians, the early months of 1979 were marked by confusion. In some areas, no one knew about the fighting with Vietnam; in some towns, villagers – including Thavory and her family – awoke one morning to find that the Khmer Rouge had suddenly vanished in the night. Other families found themselves caught in the crossfire of battle. Some were held captive by the retreating Khmer Rouge. All semblance of order vanished.

As the Khmer Rouge withdrew, they often confiscated rice and destroyed fields to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Vietnamese. The first thing Thavory did when she heard of the fall of the Khmer Rouge was get some rice and salt and run to the field where her mother was working with other villagers. She told her mother to retrieve some of the cattle, which her mother did without knowing what was happening. It was a smart decision since the second phase of starvation was soon upon the country. In some areas of Cambodia, the Vietnamese were accused of confiscating much of the existing harvest. Much of the rice that year simply rotted in the fields, as liberated Cambodians abandoned their camps in masses. Some returned to the homes they had before the revolution, while thousands of others fled to Thailand. The terrible mismanagement by the Khmer Rouge, the war and dislocation of millions had brought a continued agony to Cambodia: famine.

But important events occurred in Thavory's life in the years after the Khmer Rouge fell. On May 5, 1981, she married a policeman, and soon after the marriage she learned she was to become a mother. During her pregnancy she worked desperately hard as a teacher in their town, Kampong Thom, in order to bring some extra money home.

Her son was born on a Sunday in February 1982. Becoming a mother felt miraculous to Thavory, as she kept repeating to herself, "He is my flesh and blood." She named him Dimanche, or "Sunday" in French, but the name was changed twice before it took its final form. It was her son who chose his own name in primary school: Kannaret, which is translated "good or clever head."

Although many of the births in Cambodia were, and still are, home births, Thavory did not consider this an option due to her trust in modern medicine over traditional methods of midwives. Her mother, her husband and her stepbrother took her to the hospital when her contractions started. Thavory, like all new mothers, feared the unknowns of labor and delivery. But she had a smooth and successful delivery.

The photos of the Cambodian refugees who poured into Thailand had already made the international headlines as Thavory was painfully trying to feed her baby. She was still malnourished. Thavory's mother was critical of Thavory's inability to breastfeed and accused her of being weak. But Thavory remained silent and kept her tears to herself.

Thavory heard of the massive international campaign to aid the Cambodians, and wondered where the money was flowing to: “Was it to the refugees at the border?” The United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and some other smaller organizations began providing food and medical assistance to the border regions. But inside Cambodia, where Thavory and her growing family were barely surviving, providing aid was more difficult.

The international community still considered the Khmer Rouge to be the legitimate rulers of the country. Heng Samrin, the president of the Vietnamese-installed Cambodian government, was seen as a puppet and the United Nations refused to confer recognition to the new government. The starvation problem within the country was worse than at the refugee camps along the Thai border. Ironically, some of the refugee camps were under the direct control of the Khmer Rouge. Civilians trapped in those camps were in desperate need of food, but there was no way to ensure that aid they received would not fall into the hands of the Khmer Rouge.

Similarly, the limited international aid sent to Phnom Penh could wind up in the hands of Vietnamese soldiers. The Vietnamese often seemed to be hampering efforts to provide aid. Because there were no working telephone lines outside of Phnom Penh, the only contact with the outside world was through the daily Red Cross flight to Bangkok.

Much of the aid that did reach the interior of the country was distributed along the Thai border to Cambodians, who then carried it back into their own villages in oxcarts or on bicycles. Thavory, meanwhile, chose to live close enough to her mother’s village that she could go there to get a little food when needed.

The first year after Thavory became a mother was the most difficult. She was already weak and in need of special care, which she never received from her husband. She was lonely and homesick, wanting only to stop working so hard and “enjoy the first year of bonding with my baby.”

Thavory went without breakfast for months after delivering her son. She wanted to go to restaurants from time to time, but could never afford to do so. She remembered the smell of the noodle soup she loved so much as she passed by the restaurants. One day, she was carrying her son to the marketplace and saw the deputy director of commerce, a wealthy man, eating Chinese cake and drinking coffee with milk. Suddenly she felt extremely hungry; it was hard for her to take another step. She looked away and waited for some miracle to happen; she prayed for the energy to get to the marketplace where she could pick up some cheap vegetables for dinner.

Despite her hardship as a new mother and her desire to be with her mother and extended family, Thavory could not stay with her mother, who was taking care of her two young children. One of them adored Thavory and insisted she should come to their house. He was only 10 years old, too young to keep his promises about fetching water for baby Kannaret’s clothes. Everyone, including her mother, asked why she was so skinny. She must have looked like a skeleton. It was embarrassing for her – proof that she and her husband were leading a very poor life in town. She could almost hear the gossip around her: her husband was not taking good care of her; she had to work outside the home even though she just gave birth to her first son. In traditional Cambodian culture, she was supposed to be honored by her husband since their firstborn was a son. Instead, she had to go to her mother’s village to get food.

One day, after her mother made another comment about Thavory's skinny body, Thavory burst into tears. She said that her husband was an inadequate spouse and father and had no desire to look after their family. Thavory clearly did not want to stay with him, but she did not want to deal with the divorce procedure and the stigma that would follow. She also told her how difficult it was to fetch water everyday while her husband was taking his nap. She envied him and wished she was a man instead of a woman. That was why Thavory was initially upset when she gave birth to her daughter, Pharidette, in 1984. "A woman's life is too difficult to bear in Cambodia, that is the main reason I wanted another son."<sup>17</sup>

Hungry, sleepless nights and a crying son and daughter often made Thavory late for the class she taught. She was depressed, poor, malnourished and lacked a family support network. She and her husband owned one bicycle, which her husband always took so he wouldn't be late for his job. Thavory – who had to take her children to work because there was no one else to care for them – had to carry them for one and a half miles in the hot sun. "It was unbearable. When I finally arrived at school, I had to face the principal who was waiting for me with a frowning face. That was one of those days that I regretted I was married to such an irresponsible, selfish person."

### Crows Return

Some reports indicate that 90 percent of all teachers were killed under the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>18</sup> Young people were rigidly indoctrinated, but literacy was neglected. Thavory was lucky to have gone to school while most of her generation and those after grew up illiterate.

After the Khmer Rouge lost power, Cambodia had to recreate its educational system from almost nothing. “We are talking about thousands of young people who were under 14 and lacked any basic education.” Through the war and genocide, Thavory kept and nurtured the spirit of an educator. Her plans and dreams of a better education for herself, her children and her country always led the way.

Thavory first became a primary school teacher after the Vietnamese-backed government took over in 1979. The government needed educators. Thavory taught in pagodas because the monks had been disrobed and killed. People could not practice their religion and sites of worship were used for schooling.

The educational system in the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), the name given to Cambodia during the Vietnamese invasion, was based on the Vietnamese model. Even the terms for education changed into direct translations of the Vietnamese terms. The content of some of the textbooks, except for alphabet books, was politically oriented and dealt specifically with Vietnam. In addition, at the commencement of high school, Vietnamese and Russian language study was compulsory.

Thavory needed to complete several teacher training programs in Phnom Penh and Kampong Cham during this period. Each module lasted three months and was offered during summer holidays. After the completion of each program, Thavory was entitled to teach in a different area in the secondary school. She switched from biology to mathematics, and then to French and English. Her long-term thinking motivated her to teach English. She was able to spend extra hours studying and practicing English by herself, which led to the chance to give private lessons outside the classroom to supplement her income. She could not have this extra income by teaching biology or math because there was no demand for these subjects. No matter how slowly the changes in the country were taking place, people came to realize that English was the global language that could open doors of opportunity.

During the summer trainings offered by the government, Thavory had to share a room with many other women colleagues and their children in a dorm-like building in Phnom Penh. The living situation was awful. There were times when they had to dry up their leftover rice and sell it for some little extra money. Despite the misery, “we always created ways to have fun and even organized picnics on Sundays with our kids.”

After she married, Thavory still received no financial support from her husband. Even with the supplemental income she received teaching English, poverty and hunger were still haunting her and her family. She started to sell fruit juice in a booth set up in front of her house. Most of the customers were her students who wanted to have a refreshing drink after some intense hours at school and in private lessons. Thavory and her children, along with the other families they were living with, would also carefully cut pieces of sugarcane for treats after eating rice. “Rice is like a

magical powder sprinkled all over my life and the lives of Cambodians. It leads to peace, and I can tell you how.”



The old rice mill lacked its most vital part. Its grinding machine was taken by some villagers after the Khmer Rouge was defeated. Yet the old mill served as the vital part of the village. It was turned into an adult literacy class for women by the Ministry of Education. Thavory was assigned as the instructor in February 1981.

There were no walls, only a zinc roof. That was why every afternoon from 1 to 3 o'clock, the mill looked like a picnic area rather than a classroom. Thavory says it was refreshing to teach in the open air. She was given one blackboard and some chalk. “That was enough for the time.”

Students brought mats, cushions and their children with them. The education plan focused on women and young girls and was part of the government's three-year plan to eliminate illiteracy in Cambodia. Thavory was working, unpaid, with two other colleagues. Instead of a salary, they received rations of rice and flour.

In the mornings, Thavory taught her regular students at the pagoda. “I know neither a pagoda nor an old deserted rice mill sound like ‘standard’ school buildings. However, we had lived through hell. We all survived genocide and starvation. We could still foresee some desperate times approaching. Now it was time for us to wake up, recover from the nightmare and get back to living life.” It did not matter the place Thavory chose to teach, as long as she served people. She was serving Buddha by educating people.

Life was full of surprises for Thavory. She reunited with some of her childhood friends in the literacy class. Saroeurn, who was her competitor in hopscotch when she was a child, sat in the front. Ken, who as a child climbed mango trees with Thavory, now preferred to be at the corner of the middle row. Another, Seephon, had always been “a naughty girl. She kept the same clever look she had as a girl. It was hard to believe that the two kids playing about were Seephon's.”

I taught them all the letters first. Then I taught them how to spell a word, combining vowels and consonants together. After the alphabet, I taught them how to calculate: multiply, add, subtract and divide. It had been a thrilling experience. I mean, how many people get to teach a literacy class to their own childhood friends, especially after surviving genocide? None of us could have imagined it.

The classroom setting was quite different from a conventional setting. It was noisy because of the babies and children who accompanied their mothers. Some women had their pencils and notebooks on their laps. Some had only a small piece of wooden board and chalk instead of notebooks. Once in the middle of class, one of the women let out a cry. Her baby had peed on her lap and everyone laughed. Another woman soon got the nickname *minh lorb see*, or “food sneaking auntie.” Her own son told on her when she would sneak food during the class time. Some women held their breastfeeding babies with one hand, while holding a pencil with the other.

The rice mill was within walking distance of Thavory's grandfather's house – the house she grew up in and where she now lived while teaching, before she got married. Her uncle, his wife and many cousins were living there. She had her own room and kitchen, but she enjoyed having the family there, too. It was extremely fortunate that her grandfather's house survived. The Khmer Rouge used it as a warehouse to keep rice and other food stuffs. "It must have looked the same except that no children were playing hide-and-seek in it." Her mother refused to move back for a long time, due to her fear of the Khmer Rouge terror. She thought the same regime may seize power again one day.

On her way home from school one day, Thavory saw some black silhouettes in the sky. The crows were back. Not as many as there used to be, but it seemed they decided Cambodia was safe again. "That was a great sign, a sign of hope and motivation for the future. I haven't told it to anybody. I smiled. I was in such a good mood when I arrived home." She envisioned her future children guarding the dried fish from the crows, the same way her grandmother used to.

### Culture of Mistrust

“Plates in a basket will rattle.” The Cambodian proverb means people living in close proximity to one another are bound to clash.

In 1996, one in every six women in Cambodia was a victim of domestic violence, and more than seven in 10 people personally know a family where violence is common.<sup>19</sup>

The Project Against Domestic Violence (PADV) is one of the few nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Cambodia dedicated exclusively to the prevention and elimination of domestic violence. Their guiding principle is that providing services to victims will be ineffective in the long term unless public awareness is raised and traditional attitudes to domestic violence are challenged.

When Thavory moved to Phnom Penh in 1998, she worked as a private English tutor for the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO), where her cousin was a full-time employee and had connections with PADV staff.<sup>20</sup> Some of Thavory’s students were working for PADV as well. They informed her there was a temporary position as an education program assistant. Thavory soon switched from being an English instructor at TPO to a program assistant at PADV.

PADV’s research revealed that shame is the dominant emotion among victims of domestic violence, as it damages a woman’s reputation and ability to fulfill her role as a good Cambodian woman. The educator in Thavory was convinced that in order to change the traditional ideas and values that view domestic violence as a private family problem, voices of the victims need to be heard. Those voices included her own.

PADV was trying to find women who could share their experiences openly, without feelings of shame or guilt. When they found out that Thavory was a survivor of domestic violence, some of the employees asked Thavory to speak up and share her experiences with other women. There was nothing to be ashamed of. If there was someone to point fingers at, it would have to be her ex-husband. PADV organized several trainings and workshops, which included hearing the accounts of a survivor of domestic violence. Though most of the participants were female, there were some men as well.

Thavory shared her story with generous details. Sometimes it almost sounded like someone else’s story to her. She told the crowd, her first glance at her husband was through a bullet-hole in her mother’s house. She liked him right away because he was tall and handsome. She now sees that bullet-hole as an omen. Because she had seen him, literally, from one side only, he looked like a tall and young figure in a shadow-play. But on that day he came to visit with a family acquaintance, her mother knew it was all staged. She had seen this play before and could tell the figure was deceptive. When the lights were turned off, he could be less than what he seemed. “She proved to be right,” Thavory would shake her head to the audience in the seminar. “He even lied about his education level,” something she discovered after they got married. His marriage to her was all part of the façade.

Within 10 years of their marriage, Thavory’s husband became the chief police officer of the town of Kampong Thom. He carried guns everywhere he went. Thavory told the listeners, “I did

not know each time he laid his hands on his guns, he was aiming at my own spirit and future.” The culture of mistrust had sucked the air from Cambodian society – even down to the familial level – since the reign of the Khmer Rouge; likewise, Thavory’s marriage suffocated.

Thavory’s husband was not always consistent in his behavior. There were days when he came home full of guilt, repenting.

One day, when he was sober, he came home and told me how much he appreciated my patience with him. He added that I was too good for him and he felt like he was doomed to be left by me one day. He was right. He knew what was coming. Maybe that was the main reason why he gradually got more violent and threatened to kill me.

Another day, however, he told Thavory that he would be much better off if only he got married to a “Kuoy woman, a tribe-girl.”<sup>21</sup> Then I could have more control over her; she would have listened to me more.” Thavory explained to the women in the seminar about the “power and control” mechanism in an abusive relation. Her ex-husband was unfortunately a “perfect illustration” to talk about in the trainings offered at PADV.

Thavory told another story at the trainings. On a rainy night in July 1998, hushing the growing fear in her mind, she began packing. “Weapons do not tame, they kill. You are so insecure and powerless without your weapons,” she murmured to the shadow-figure of her husband. She was determined to get a divorce, both for her own and her children’s sake. She did not have much to pack.

She went on:

In my previous attempts to leave him, I had been weak and indecisive. I once came very close, on the night when my husband assaulted me violently with his gun after a 19-year-old volunteer from the U.S. gave me a spontaneous hug in front of him. What twisted thinking! My husband was obsessively jealous.

It was pouring rain the night Thavory left him. She knew that she had to be in class the next morning to teach, but she had no patience left to put up with his jealousy and alcoholism. His alcoholism made it like she was “embracing a jar of wine every night.” He had beaten her many times with his AK-47, and she was determined to escape this time.

Thavory announced to her husband her decision to move to Phnom Penh; he became furious. In his fury, he rushed to bring her two suitcases from the bedroom and threw them on the floor. He said, “If you go to Phnom Penh, make sure that you never come back here again. Because if you do, I will shoot you in both feet.”

By asserting her right to leave the house, Thavory was aware of the spread of gossip and the effect it would have on her husband. He lacked self-confidence and was deeply influenced by his family and colleagues. The “virtuous” woman in Cambodia is expected to be modest and obedient. Thavory had enough of analyzing her husband’s unpredictable behavior and knocked on the door of a best friend of her mother. Palla’s house, Thavory believed, could be safe – at least for the night.

Exactly at 9 p.m., Thavory's husband came to Palla's door looking for Thavory. There was a loud, pouring rain, yet Thavory could hear the conversation between her husband and Palla. He was asking her the whereabouts of Thavory in a threatening and insistent manner. Palla calmly repeated that Thavory was not in the house and added, "If you don't believe me, you are welcome to come in and take a look." This was a risky, but effective tactic. Palla knew it was illegal to enter a house with a weapon without a search warrant. Thavory's husband grumbled and said he was not officially permitted to enter. After he grew tired of questioning Palla, Thavory heard his footsteps dying away. Palla told Thavory they should immediately arrange a taxi to escape from Kampong Thom to Phnom Penh. The capital was a four-hour drive away.

Fortunately, the taxi driver was Palla's next-door neighbor, so Thavory could leave without being seen. Her husband had been aware of his power when he shouted at her, "You can't just disappear from here! You'll first have to face my fellow officers who patrol all around the town." But he underestimated the skillful ways Thavory and her friends could cooperate and support one another through their "informal women's network." Thavory murmured, "*You* may own as many weapons as you can in your life, but *I* have the brains and the friends."

Thavory was glad not to be questioned by the driver. Although he must have been suspicious about her actions, he kept quiet and listened to the soccer game on the radio and the commentaries after.

When Thavory arrived at her aunt's house, located next to the Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, she found her aunt doing the morning chores – washing clothes in a washtub and sweeping the courtyard. Although taken aback by the unexpected visitor, she welcomed Thavory wholeheartedly and saved any questions she might have had for later. Thavory told her that she was not turning back. She would find a new job and her children would get a better education in a peaceful household.

"At last, I had made it," said Thavory to the women who were listening attentively in the room. One could read the interest and respect in their eyes. But she conceded to her audience, "He gave me invisible bullet holes which fortunately you cannot see."

Thavory's ex-husband caused real damage to her, unlike the figure of a shadow puppet. Yet his acts inspired Thavory in her involvement with PADV. He strengthened her immediate commitment to developing non-violent ways to peace. In her concluding remarks, Thavory said to her audience:

Today, my children and I no longer breathe the heavy air of mistrust that had so long infected my marriage. By sharing my story with you, I hope to create a change in your lives. Please tell my story to all your friends and family. I don't want anybody to experience what I experienced.

### Harmony

After Thavory moved to Phnom Penh and divorced, she did her best to give her children the best possible education, which included how to practice Cambodian traditions. She wanted to keep the traditions alive among the youth. “If I could, I’d like to adopt all the children who don’t have parents or who have irresponsible parents.” Though she can’t take them all, she did adopt one child in 1999: Phirom Gnim, which means “harmony.”

Thavory’s determination to adopt Phirom challenged gender roles in Cambodia because she was divorced when she took custody of him. Phirom’s father was a lottery ticket seller, but over time he wanted to be the “player,” not just the seller. He ended up in huge debt and was eventually shot by those he owed money. Phirom’s mother – Thavory’s stepsister – was not a working woman and the only way to make money for her son was through illegal means. Thavory resisted her mother’s suggestion of lending money to the family. Instead, she took legal responsibility and became a second mother to Phirom, then 13 years old, so that he could attend school. “If I lent money to them, who knows how it would be spent. By adopting him and making sure that he was educated, his life would be on track.”

“Although Phirom is still hesitant to call me mom, he is close to me and lives with me. We are like mother and son.” He now attends an Italian trade school, Don Bosco, where he is taking mechanics courses.

Thavory’s adoption of Phirom illustrates her commitment as a peace educator. She could foresee the dark future waiting for a teenager who lacked family support and education in Cambodia. She could see that access to weapons was a threat, because some young people see them as the most practical way to protect themselves. Thavory wanted to keep her own family away from small arms as best she could. “I want to change the attitude toward weapons in this society. The first and the best place to start is within your family.”

### Peace Education and Weapons Reduction

One day while teaching English at the rice mill, after the women deciphered the basic reading material, Thavory – a “closet peacemaker” at the time – decided to insert some new topics into her syllabus. She had one particular reading passage in mind that she remembered from her school days, “possibly from grade seven,” she remembers. It was a comparison of times of war and peace in a country. She gave a list of what might be considered as part of a “daily life routine” during a time of peace: going out for a walk, going to market for shopping, visiting friends or having tea. In the following section of the same page were the limitations in everyday life due to war, including food shortages and blocked roads. “You cannot visit your friends to enjoy a cup of tea when there is war,” Thavory continued in the class. “You cannot go and pray in pagodas. You cannot fulfill your basic needs.”

Thavory was well aware of the possible effects of these paragraphs on the students. Many students – and Thavory herself – were in despair because of their personal experiences with war. Their daily struggle was ongoing. One of her students asked, “Teacher, how do we go on now? After the war and genocide, we don’t have any rice to grow. We don’t have any food or money. What can we do for ourselves and our children?”

Thavory found it difficult to answer, but she was glad she raised the issue among the women. She then thought of some possible solutions and opened discussion. She suggested that official formations of solidarity among people might actually work. The government should help to organize people as well, Thavory thought. Forming cooperatives on a community level could help people who have no family support. “If a widow is having a hard time finding food or housing for herself, the community – for instance, her neighbors – should help her until she can stand on her own. They should not let her suffer or starve under any circumstances.”

This was one of the incidents that triggered Thavory’s desire to work for peace through the vehicle of education. After gaining experience in other NGOs, such as PADV and the Association of Nuns and Lay Women (ANLWC),<sup>22</sup> Thavory started working actively on peace education in 2001, in her new job with the Working Group for Weapons Reduction (WGWR).

WGWR is a Cambodian nonprofit organization working to promote peace and safety for people at all levels of Cambodian society. It was established by a group of local and international organizations and individuals in August 1998. Thavory shared the organization’s concern about the number of weapons in circulation and the level of violence in society. She had been exposed to different forms of violence in her own life and wanted to contribute to society, making her teaching experience more meaningful when combined with her personal life.

As the program manager for WGWR, Thavory became involved in several projects – two in particular that she cared for deeply. One involved establishing peace rooms in school libraries. She thus had the “opportunity to work directly with children and young people and read their essays on role models of peace and social justice.” Thavory finds the task of introducing the right role models to children of Cambodia crucial for a peaceful future. She and her colleagues used the manual, “Time to Abolish War,” which included not only national and regional role models, but international ones, too.<sup>23</sup>

“What is your vision for the future? Who do you choose as your role model? Why?” These are the main questions Thavory and her team pose to the students in the peace rooms. They keep a database of the essays written by the students.

The other project was a capacity-building program designed to train teachers from two target provinces, Kampong Thom and Kampong Chhnang. The program expanded in time to other regions due to increased demand. The teachers coming to Phnom Penh for the trainings were very engaged in the work and returned to their schools motivated.

One person in particular stood out among all the participants: Yanara Norng. He was a student who behaved violently in school, yet received the best grades. After school, he wanted to become a soldier, which was highly discouraged by his father, so he became deputy director of a high school. Unfortunately, his violent acts were aggravated as an educator. He was violent toward the students and inflicted some forms of corporal punishment.

How he found out about our program or who convinced him to register for the training, I have no idea. However, the training worked magic on him. It was so amazing to observe his progress. He became very vocal in peace campaigns. After he completed our training, he organized several events related to peace and disarmament awareness in his school and invited us.

Yanara Norng encouraged local singers to give concerts on peace in schools. He told Thavory directly that the peace education programs changed his whole attitude, not only toward education, but also toward life. He was transformed – living proof to Thavory that human behavior can be remolded in constructive ways.

In another incident, the director of the Provincial Department of Education, Youth and Sports in Kampong Thom agreed to incorporate WGWR’s program in his district after some consideration. Upon the completion of the program, he came to Phnom Penh to give a speech at WGWR. Two hundred participants from all over the country were invited. He said:

I came here to thank the Peace and Disarmament Education Project Team for the effort they put into this program. At first, I was very hesitant and did not see the point of having peace and disarmament education at schools. However, the result has proven to be very impressive. The number of cases of violence and conflicts among the students decreased in schools of Kampong Thom town.

Later, the public endorsement of the peace curriculum and lesson plans by the Minister for Education, and his speech to a national teacher’s conference, also encouraged the WGWR team and teachers around the country. Thavory, working with an international staff, was aware of the hesitation by some people about collaborating with the government. They dreamed of “rewriting the history curriculum,” but the political situation prevented such an approach. However, the citizenship curriculum with a focus on peace and disarmament in government schools has been an effective “entry point.”

Thavory’s colleagues, in order to illustrate the spread of weapons in the high schools, would tell the story of a 14-year-old student who came from a wealthy family and showed off in school by

threatening others. At the end of the school year, this student was angry over a failing grade he received. He drew a gun out of his pocket during the weekly ceremony in which the students sing the national anthem. He pointed it at the associate director of the school and threatened to kill him. Everyone froze. As the student was counting down from three, one of his friends hollered at him from the side street, distracting him. The associate director managed to escape.

Thavory's colleagues told her this story to warn her of potential harm, for she was known as a disciplinarian teacher. Instead of scaring her, however, the story motivated Thavory further.

As a teacher, Thavory knew that most of her students were already exposed to violence in their houses and neighborhoods, so she taught by using more creative ways, such as singing, telling jokes in class and playing educational games to explain difficult topics. She never used violence as a form of discipline. Because of the success of her teaching methods, her colleagues acknowledged her as one of the best teachers in the school.

One day Thavory was upset with some of the students in her class who grew louder and louder and did not pay any attention to what she was explaining. She stopped and asked one of the loudest students why he was being so disruptive. He told her he did not need to listen to her since his family would hire a private tutor for him. "Another spoiled kid who thought that money could fix everything." Rather than punishing or insulting him, Thavory described how she stayed calm in situations – through meditation, which she learned from her work with ANLWC. All the students were intrigued and became attentive, including the disruptive student. He felt embarrassed and later apologized to Thavory. The next morning, Thavory practiced meditation in the classroom and, surprisingly, even the most violent students were interested in practicing it. One of her students later brought her mother and other women relatives to the ANLWC to learn more about meditation. "That was a very encouraging example for me in many ways. It was about practicing a peaceful approach in class, spreading the word about the NGO and recruiting more volunteers for the future."

### No More Kapok Trees

There is a common saying in the Khmer language about remaining silent. The name for the kapok tree in Khmer is *kob*, a word which also means “mute.” During the Pol Pot era, there was an oft-repeated saying: “If you want to live, grow a koh tree in front of your house.” This saying was directed mainly at the “new people,” and was considered part official threat and part unofficial advice. The saying warned people to remain silent about everything they had seen, heard, knew or felt.

Though directed at the “new people,” it was also a typical characteristic of Cambodian traditional society. People are advised not to speak up, nor to express their feelings and opinions – regardless of gender – under the cover of respect or politeness. This practice is reinforced in the Cambodian educational system as well as within the family. Thavory, an experienced educator, has dedicated herself to changing this attitude since the 1980s. Although she grew up under the *kapok* tree mentality and finds it a difficult battle from time to time, she tries to identify and isolate any behavior that encourages silence.

I am tired of being silenced by people in the past and I do not want to silence others. By ‘others,’ I mean my students and children. I was taught to be silent and obedient like a *kapok* tree. Unfortunately, the two most important women in my family, my grandmother and mother, were also silencing me. I can see their actions under a different light now, but there were times when I got very upset with them. By suppressing my voice, they felt powerful in their own limited space. Raising me as the ‘good Cambodian girl’ meant silencing me, drowning my words and ideas. I was so fortunate to have a grandfather who never discriminated against my gender and educated me by offering me his room which was full of books. He used to listen to the Chinese radio channel and summarized for us what was going on in the world.

The traditional beliefs about the two sexes are deeply rooted in culture. A Cambodian girl used to be compared to a piece of cotton wool, and a boy to a diamond. A diamond, when dropped into mud, can be washed as clean and sparkling as before, while cotton wool can never regain its purity once it has been dirtied. “How can you eradicate these types of expressions from your own language?”

Thavory’s daughter, Pharidette, has been very vocal in expressing her concerns regarding gender inequality. Thavory finds this astonishing, not because of her daughter’s ideas, but for the adult tone she uses in expressing these strong opinions. “She is mature and calm for her age.” Once, Thavory’s mother had saved the larger portion of their meal with meat for her grandson, instead of Pharidette. She asked her grandmother, “Why do you discriminate against your own sex, grandma? You are a woman yourself, right?”

My generation of women has been a very unfortunate one. It is unfortunate because during my mother’s time, it was OK for women to stay at home and raise a family. Most women were proud of raising a family and doing household duties while men worked outside and brought bread home. The gender roles were clear cut. However, the women in my generation had to work so hard, inside and outside of the house because men were at war and poverty was at an extreme level. Women of my

generation had to work extra jobs, mostly selling things on the market or on the streets. Men were either soldiers or unemployed. They lost their status and, thus, gave up the responsibilities for the families, too. Yet they still acted arrogant. Protecting the family name and honor was their main concern. Today, the younger generation of women, like my daughter, they are lucky. They can receive higher education and work outside or raise a family, or do both if they can manage to do so. They have alternatives. Not like us.

### International Encouragement

Struggling within the power structures of the society, even within civil society, can be frustrating in Cambodia. Cronyism and bribery are major problems in society. Making a good and honest career is extremely difficult without influential family connections. Thavory often wonders how much help international NGOs can realistically offer under a system that functions at elephant speed.

One of the key concepts Thavory now emphasizes in her peace work is encouragement, something that did not exist in Cambodian society when she was growing up. Thavory did not have confidence in herself for a long time.

When I say self-confidence, I am not only talking about making a career, I am also talking about confidence in being a woman. It was thanks to my non-Cambodian female friends who came to Cambodia through their NGOs that I built a new self. I began to appreciate the qualities I already have but never thought about before. Also, the friends I made during the international conferences and trainings helped me to see life through different lenses.

#### ***Barbara Weike of Australia***

Teachers were sitting in the seats of their students. They were gathered for a one-year teacher training program organized for English teachers in Phnom Penh in 1991. Thavory was a participant and had high expectations of the program. It would also be a good chance to practice her English, which she was struggling to improve at the time. The trainer, from Australia, was named Barbara.

After the trainings, the women were given some extra time to evaluate themselves and get feedback from each other, but in a game format. There was only one rule in this game: When someone makes comments about the other, she was not supposed to use the word “but.” It was Barbara’s turn. She started by expressing her positive feelings and opinions about Thavory and then said:

Thavory compares herself with others. Only if we can all acknowledge the fact that each and every person on earth is gifted with different talents, skills and intelligence, we can then stop comparing ourselves with others. We can feel unique and beautiful. When I look into Thavory’s eyes, I see a beautiful woman. She will become more beautiful if she stops comparing herself with others. I see an enormous potential in her to improve herself in ways that no one else possibly can.

Thavory could not believe what she had heard. Barbara was an astute observer. “I was always double-checking to see if I had done things any better or worse than the people around me. It is different to hear who you are from someone else, especially from someone you like and trust.” It was Barbara who challenged Thavory’s concept of beauty and assisted her to make self discoveries.

Thavory was strong enough to fight for her education – and survive starvation and genocide. But despite her cleverness and tact, Thavory struggled with body image. She did not feel strong enough to wear pants. She hid her body under baggy skirts. She walked miles for weeks during the evacuation of Phnom Penh, yet could not enjoy swimming in the green rivers of her country – until she met Barbara.

One day, Barbara suggested Thavory cross the river with her in a small boat that looked quite unsafe. They ended up swimming in the river: “It was so good to feel the fresh water all around my body.” Thavory had a new confidence and even changed her body language.

One day I visited a relative of mine whom I hadn’t seen for so long. He had always been a supportive and kind person even after I got divorced. He welcomed me in his office and then told me that he could not recognize me from a distance because of the way I walked.

He told Thavory that she looked completely different than how he remembered her, walking and talking self-confidently.

### ***Emma Leslie of Australia***

“In Cambodia, especially in the presence of Westerners, we have the tendency to leave major tasks to foreigners. We lack self-confidence and are reluctant to take charge of things.” In 2001, when she met another Australian woman, Emma, Thavory became aware of her own attitude which kept her from taking the initiative in her own organizations in the past. She wanted to work on building her self-confidence. However, it did not happen in one day. It took her months. Emma’s way was subtle, leading by example.

When Thavory met her for the first time, Emma was only 28 years old and married to a Cambodian man whom she had met in England. She was the project consultant of the peace and disarmament project in the organization where Thavory was working.

Before I met Emma, I was a very serious person; she taught me to add humor to my professional life and to remember to smile from time to time. Her encouragement of me in my times of frustration saved me from feeling depressed and gave me courage to continue in life. I feel indebted to her.

### ***Hema Goonatilake of Sri Lanka***

Thavory liked the way Hema tossed her long ponytail behind her shoulders. Her mature face was always calm and understanding. “We went to Nepal together for the 6th International Conference on Buddhist Women, Sakyadhiti.” Thavory was working for ANLWC at the time, and Hema was the country representative for the Heinrich Boell Foundation. She helped Thavory develop networking skills and introduced her to many women in a short time. This experience enriched both Thavory’s self-confidence and her circle of friends, too.

Hema said of Sri Lanka, “Today it is facing social ills that no one could have even imagined 20 years ago.” It was enlightening for Thavory to discover many concerns and problems the nations shared.

This conference was also the first time Thavory traveled internationally. Hema explained the ways to travel, change planes and fill out forms: “It was a real boost for my self-confidence, or else I would have wasted a full day in Bangkok airport waiting to transfer and would have never dared to tour the city by myself.”

At the Sakyadhita conference, hundreds of Buddhist sisters and laywomen came together to share their wisdom and strength for the betterment of societies. Thavory carries the notes she took during Hema’s farewell speech with her everywhere.

Each of us is armed with our faith. We pledged to constantly examine our intentions, speech and actions. Awareness is our checkpoint for realizing the work we do. The purity of our hearts will pave a direct path to benefit others, which will also uplift ourselves and our practice.

### ***Betty J. Burkes of the United States***

Betty Burkes visited Cambodia in May 2002 when she was serving as pedagogical coordinator for The Hague Appeal for Peace in partnership with the U.N. Department of Disarmament Affairs. Betty had the patience Thavory thought she was missing in herself. She talked for hours with Thavory about how to balance her life and how to quell a quick temper. She gave me wonderful tips about being calm and controlling my temper.” They practiced yoga together, as Betty was an avid follower of Buddha and practiced yoga for years.

On Betty’s invitation, Thavory received Peace and Conflict Resolution training at Columbia University in New York for one week. “It was during that training that I got rid of my shyness in public.” While in New York, she also gave a talk at the U.N. Department for Disarmament Affairs: “There I was, talking about my work on peace and disarmament education in Cambodia, addressing a group of educated Americans.”

In July 2004, Betty asked Thavory to share her experiences in peace training with a group of American high school teachers at Lesley University in Massachusetts. With Betty’s astute observations, she discovered that when communicating with foreigners, her body language could be more effective than her verbal English.



Thavory believes in the constructive power of establishing an international women’s network; she is eager to collect business cards. “I don’t feel shy about it. I want to remember and keep in touch with all the women I meet around the world. That is one straight way to peace.”

Thavory remembers Barbara each time she wears pants instead of baggy skirts. She thinks of Emma and her calm soothing looks whenever she feels frustrated or is out of patience. She regularly practices the breathing techniques Betty taught her. Hema’s long ponytail reminds her of a flowing

river. Thavory keeps all her women friends in her heart wherever she goes. Her circle of peace and friends is getting larger.

### Women for Self-Development

Thavory's main goal for the future is to serve and contribute to her community. Her primary focus is on women and young girls. After her divorce, she worked hard and established a respectable and successful name – “like my grandfather” – for her family for generations.

Everybody remembers him as a good-hearted and respectable man because of his contribution to the village. He is my role model in the family. Cheng Sun Heng is a name that is honorable to mention for us. I want the same for myself and for my children.

Thavory has begun work establishing an NGO in a very small and poor village called Sdoc Sdam in Kampong Thom. There is something unique about this village: It is the site of one of the labor camps where Thavory lived and worked during the Khmer Rouge era. She now pays visits to the village as a program manager for the Women for Self-Development Project. She is no longer the young laborer whose hands looked wrinkled and red after hours of rice planting. She can see her own reflection in the eyes of the young girls she has been talking to in the last few years.

When Thavory's first proposal to the United Nations for funding was rejected, she did not give up. She remembered a young, self-made woman from her neighborhood, Tinna Leav, who worked for TPO for years. Tinna had been denied access to a university education by her family, who sent only their sons to university. One of her relatives, who knew that Tinna was a very clever and skillful girl, gave her money so she could learn typing and how to use a computer. She finished the course with great success. Some years later she was hired by TPO as a secretary, and in 1993, she became the office manager. She was someone whom Thavory could trust and work with toward her goals. Their second proposal for U.N. funding was successful and they received a small amount of money.

With this money, Thavory helped start the Women for Self-Development Project. The most visible activities involved training in sewing, meditation and massage, knowing that “if we cannot start something that generates income for the girls in the village, the only option left for them is to go to bigger towns or cities and work in the factories. When they leave their villages, they are prone to meet traffickers or turn into prostitutes.”

In addition to these income-generating activities, Thavory's main plan is to offer peace education and promote harmony in the village. She wants to organize an exchange program to introduce trainings on peace, communication and decision making. These are new terms for the villagers who suffered decades of war and poverty. But they are curious and eager to learn.

The funding that Thavory and Tinna received from the United Nations is very limited. They receive no salary. The money goes to training and basic equipment, such as sewing machines, clothes and chairs. However, Thavory is not discouraged. She is writing and editing proposals for further applications. Once they receive enough funding, she knows the village will prosper.

I want to keep and expand my international connections in order to learn more from the others. But I want to stay in Cambodia. I have many plans for the future, but

maybe not much time to realize them. So, I will sleep less and work more. I hope to leave an honorable name for my children.

**BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER –**  
**OZLEM EZER**

Ozlem Ezer grew up in Istanbul, Turkey and has spent time working with diverse groups and organizations, including with the United Nations Development Programme in Ankara and as a teaching assistant in various universities. She holds a B.A. in English Language and Literature, an M.A. in Women's Studies, and is pursuing a Ph.D. in Women's Studies from York University. Her area of expertise is genres in women's life writing as well as women's travel literature since the 17th century.

Ezer has taught at the College of DuPage outside of Chicago, Ill., and English as a Second Language (ESL) in the Cappadocia region of central Anatolia in Turkey. She is currently a full-time instructor of ESL at the Northern Cyprus Campus of the Middle Eastern Technical University.

## **JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE & JUSTICE**

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. Through education, research and peacemaking activities, the IPJ offers programs that advance scholarship and practice in conflict resolution and human rights. The institute, a unit of the University of San Diego's Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, draws on Catholic social teaching that sees peace as inseparable from justice and acts to prevent and resolve conflicts that threaten local, national and international peace.

The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the University of San Diego to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice. Programming began in early 2001 and the building was dedicated in December 2001 with a conference, "Peacemaking with Justice: Policy for the 21st Century."

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to "not only talk about peace, but make peace." The IPJ offers its services to parties in conflict to provide mediation and facilitation, assessments, training and consultations. It advances peace with justice through work with members of civil society in zones of conflict and has a focus on mainstreaming women in peace processes.

In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute has several ongoing programs. The Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series is a forum for high-level national and international leaders and policymakers to share their knowledge and perspective on issues related to peace and justice.

WorldLink, a year-round educational program for middle school and high school students from San Diego and Baja California, connects youth to global affairs.

Country programs, such as the Nepal Project, offer wide-ranging conflict assessments, mediation and conflict resolution training workshops.

Community outreach includes speakers, films, art and opportunities for discussion between community members, academics and practitioners on issues of peace and social justice, as well as dialogue with national and international leaders in government, nongovernmental organizations and the military.

In addition to the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies includes the Trans-Border Institute, which promotes border-related scholarship and an active role for the university in the cross-border community, and a master's program in Peace and Justice Studies to train future leaders in the field.

## **UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO**

Chartered in 1949, the University of San Diego (USD) is a Roman Catholic institution of higher learning located on 180 acres overlooking San Diego's Mission Bay. The University of San Diego is committed to promoting academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional knowledge, creating a diverse community and preparing leaders dedicated to ethical and compassionate service.

The university is steadfast in its dedication to the examination of the Catholic tradition as the basis of a continuing search for meaning in contemporary life. Global peace and development and the application of ethics and values are examined through campus centers and institutes such as the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Values Institute, the Trans-Border Institute, the Center for Public Interest Law, the Institute for Law and Philosophy and the International Center for Character Education. Furthermore, through special campus events such as the Social Issues Conference, the James Bond Stockdale Leadership and Ethics Symposium and the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series, we invite the community to join us in further exploration of these values.

The USD campus, considered one of the most architecturally unique in the nation, is known as Alcalá Park. Like the city of San Diego, the campus takes its name from San Diego de Alcalá, a Franciscan brother who served as the infirmarian at Alcalá de Henares, a monastery near Madrid, Spain. The Spanish Renaissance architecture that characterizes the five-century-old University of Alcalá serves as the inspiration for the buildings on the USD campus. The architecture was intended by the founders, Bishop Charles Francis Buddy and Mother Rosalie Hill, to enhance the search for truth through beauty and harmony. Recent additions, such as the state-of-the-art Donald P. Shiley Center for Science and Technology and the new School of Leadership and Education Sciences building carry on that tradition.

A member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa, USD is ranked among the nation's top 100 universities. The university offers its 7,500 undergraduate, graduate and law students rigorous academic programs in more than 60 fields of study through six academic divisions, including the College of Arts and Sciences and the schools of Business Administration, Leadership and Education Sciences, Law, and Nursing and Health Science. The Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies opened in Fall 2007.

**LIST OF ACRONYMS**

<b>ANLWC</b>	Association of Nuns and Lay Women
<b>CPK</b>	Communist Party of Kampuchea
<b>ESL</b>	English as a Second Language
<b>IPJ</b>	Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
<b>NGO</b>	Nongovernmental Organization
<b>PADV</b>	Project Against Domestic Violence
<b>PRK</b>	People's Republic of Kampuchea
<b>TPO</b>	Transcultural Psychosocial Organization
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>USD</b>	University of San Diego
<b>WGWR</b>	Working Group for Weapons Reduction

**ENDNOTES**


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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “‘Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half* Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations not cited in the text or part of dialogue sequences are taken from interviews with Thavory Huot between September 29 and November 5, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> The other two she wrote are *Consequences of Possessing Weapons* and *Vision for My Future*.

<sup>4</sup> For further examples of translated folktales from Cambodia, see:  
[http://www.gocambodia.com/Cambodian\\_folktales/](http://www.gocambodia.com/Cambodian_folktales/)

<sup>5</sup> The tradition is rarely practiced today.

<sup>6</sup> In 1970, Gen. Lon Nol, then prime minister, had taken over the country while Prince Sihanouk was out of the country. His army, backed by the United States, then began fighting both the North Vietnamese communist guerillas within the borders of Cambodia and the communist Khmer Rouge guerillas.

<sup>7</sup> Samantha Power. *A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 88-89.

<sup>8</sup> According to Thavory, initially the Khmer Rouge was not a well-organized group, and their numbers were too small to monitor the thousands of people who were on the move. Most of the soldiers were in Phnom Penh celebrating.

<sup>9</sup> Thavory notes, “Acting like a mother also reduced the risk of sexual harassment on the road.”

<sup>10</sup> The term means *organization* in Khmer. Everything that the Khmer Rouge did was for the Angkar, but it became an abstract concept. For the first two years of the Khmer Rouge regime, most Cambodians had no idea who was running the country. The Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) believed that secrecy was one of the best tools for controlling the population. The Cambodian people did not even know the CPK existed. They were told only that the country was now run by Angkar. No leaders were mentioned by name; there was only Angkar.

<sup>11</sup> The Khmer language, like many in Southeast Asia, has a complex system for defining a speaker’s rank and social status. These usages were abandoned during the Khmer Rouge. They avoided traditional signs of respect such as bowing or folding the hands in salutation.

<sup>12</sup> This was taken from Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen’s book, *Hunger and Public Action*, a comprehensive study of hunger.

<sup>13</sup> A skin disease that looks like measles and can spread all over one’s body. It is very itchy and contagious.

<sup>14</sup> *Prabok* is a fermented fish paste. A typical Cambodian meal often includes *prabok* as an ingredient.

<sup>15</sup> The Khmer Rouge had become extremely vigilant by this time in recording and keeping track of the movements of families and individuals. The lowest unit of social control, the *krom* (group), consisted of 10 to 15 nuclear families whose activities were closely supervised by a three-person committee. This grassroots

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leadership was required to note the social origin of each family under its jurisdiction and to report it to persons higher up in the Angkar hierarchy.

<sup>16</sup> Power, *A Problem from Hell*, 114. The numbers are estimations, as Power underscores.

<sup>17</sup> Thavory underscores that she is very proud of her daughter, whom she describes as beautiful and clever.

<sup>18</sup> <http://countrystudies.us/cambodia/52.htm>

<sup>19</sup> This was one of the discoveries made by the Project Against Domestic Violence (PADV) in their “Household Survey on Domestic Violence.” Carried out in 1996, the survey was the first of its kind in Cambodia, and the largest quantitative survey of domestic violence in the world. [www.oxfam.org.uk/whatwedo/issues/gender/links/0399cambodia.htm](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/whatwedo/issues/gender/links/0399cambodia.htm).

<sup>20</sup> TPO is the current name for the former Institute for Psycho-social and Socio-Ecological Research Amsterdam (IPSER – Amsterdam), founded in 1995. The TPO program is aimed at refugees and other groups of people who have been traumatized by war, human rights violations or other forms of organized violence. For further information, see [www.camnet.com.kh/tpo/web/index.htm](http://www.camnet.com.kh/tpo/web/index.htm).

<sup>21</sup> Kuoy or Kui are hill-tribe people, a minority group. They live on the plateau in the northeastern region of Cambodia.

<sup>22</sup> The ANLWC trains nuns in Buddhist concepts of human rights, conflict resolution, leadership, trauma counseling and social work for street children. As a project coordinator for ANLWC in 1999, part of Thavory’s work involved visiting HIV patients in hospitals to offer support and compassion.

<sup>23</sup> The manual is distributed by The Hague Appeal for Peace and can be accessed online at: [www.haguepeace.org/index.php?action=resources](http://www.haguepeace.org/index.php?action=resources).