



GROWING UP IN THE POL POT REGIME EXPERIENCES OF OUR PARENTS' GENERATION

“For those who haven’t experienced it, it is very difficult to believe.”

“I remember when I would tell people about it afterwards, that they wouldn’t believe me. That hurt a lot. Now I know that they didn’t want to believe it.

When it began I was in the secondary school already. I was a city girl. One day, it changed, just like that. The Pol Pot Regime occupied the city and forced us to leave our house. We thought we would be coming back soon. We thought it would be for three days but it was for three years, eight months and twenty days.

I was put in a youth camp. There was no military training. Instead we were supposed to live the life of a farmer. The camp was guarded and if you tried to escape you got the punishment. We didn’t think about anything but survival. We thought from one day to the next.

I was a young girl who had been really spoiled. So I was very impatient with this new situation. I complained a lot, saying that I wasn’t going to do this kind of hard work. When I was able to see my father I would say, ‘I want to go back to school. I want to sleep in a nice bed.’ Because we had to sleep on the ground where the people ploughed the earth and I hated that. My father worried that I would be punished for my attitude. He used to say, ‘Please be patient. Look – everybody has the same situation. Please don’t speak that way, you will get in trouble.’

My friend and I used to try to speak French sometimes to each other. But then they found out that we were doing this. They called me to them one night at midnight. They said I had to go for re-education because of speaking a foreign language. This was not permitted – it was a serious offence. They said, ‘Next time we hear you speaking these foreign words you will be killed.’ They called my father and said, ‘You have to tell your daughter to shut up.’ He cried when he talked to me about this.

So I tried to forget everything that I knew. I was frightened to use my mind. I tried to just be obedient, to be like an animal.

It is impossible to forget this time, though people try. After the Pol Pot Regime many people became weak. Weak inside because they had lost family and they felt hopeless. They said that they couldn’t stand up against the feelings inside. Many people felt very sad. They kept their feelings inside themselves and they were very reserved with each other.

So when they later became parents how could we expect that they would suddenly be warm with their children? I changed but that is because I had a good childhood before. I had love. I think your upbringing reflects on how you bring up your own children. And for children during the Pol Pot Regime there was no love.”

*Interview with Mo Thany,
Founder and executive director of the Child Rights Foundation, Cambodia.*