

# FREED FROM THE MASTERS OF TERROR

## Hong Var survived four years of horror at the hands of the world's most vicious rulers

Hong Var's pretty, smiling face gives no hint of the traumas of four gruelling years of toil and terror under the Khmer Rouge regime.

With her two children and sister, Var is settling into a new life in a comfortable house in Godalming in Surrey's stockbroker belt . . . worlds away from the paddy fields of Cambodia, where the Khmer Rouge soldiers inflicted their heartless rule.

Soul-destroying drudgery wading about in the rice fields, was Var's life for four years. And while Var harvested the crop, her two daughters Sokmale and Panita gathered dung for fertiliser.

Merely complaining about the work in earshot of a soldier would mean almost certain execution. Accidentally breaking a ploughshare could also mean death. But Var came through all this with her life – and her faith in God – intact.

Since the nightmare began, four years ago, Var has never seen her husband. At the time of the Khmer Rouge takeover of Cambodia, he was studying in France. 'Someone told me that he went back to Cambodia, I haven't seen him since 1974 and I don't know what has happened to him'

Var's harrowing story – and the plight of millions of Cambodians – began in the Spring of 1975. After years of fighting, the Khmer Rouge guerrillas finally took the capital city of Phnom Penh at 9.30 am on April 17th.

Three million residents were ordered out of Phnom Penh in a massive evacuation by the invading troops.

### Abandon

Var, a language and literature teacher, who had become a Christian in 1974, her two children and two families of relatives loaded up a jeep with belongings and five bags of rice. But it was not long before they had to abandon it and start walking. It was a long, hard, tiring walk. For some of the city people it was too much; they died of exhaustion, their bodies lying at the roadside.

Var was heading for her birthplace in Takeo province, but after two weeks on the dusty roads, the family group was stopped by the Khmer Rouge, within two days' walk of their destination.

Although they wanted to go on, the soldiers made them stay and work in the fields. For the next seven months Var and her family lived in the village of Sla, with 120 peasant families and 70 families of newcomers from Phnom Penh.

The working hours were irregular, but usually long. On some days, says Var, she was wakened at 1am, worked for six hours, and after a short break for breakfast, continued to noon. Another short break for lunch was followed by more work until 5 or 5.30 pm. Sometimes it was dark again by the time she returned home.

Var recalls: 'The Khmer Rouge took away my Bible and burnt it. We were ordered to work in the field planting rice and moving earth to make irrigation channels. The children were sent to gather dung as fertiliser. We were given one small tin full of rice each day. Only those with gold were able to buy extra food. There was no money.'

Then, in December 1975, Var and her daughters, along with hundreds of thousands of others, were taken by train to the distant Battambang province on the Thai border.

Here, in the village of Andaung Klong, Var and her children were to live for more than three years. And soon Var noticed a difference between the Khmer Rouge in her new surroundings and those she first laboured under. Here the soldiers were much more cruel.

'The Khmer Rouge treated us like animals. More than very bad. They were very evil men, even to the pregnant women. They made them work. We worked in the fields growing rice, in the forests to cut down trees. I saw many dead in the forests. We saw skeletons near the border. Hundreds, thousands, I think,' says Var.

Looking back, Var believes that God helped her through this awful time. 'Although we had no Bible, every day we prayed with the children, and I taught them all I could remember about Jesus. When we prayed, things did not seem quite so bad, and we knew God was helping us.'

But the end was in sight for the Khmer Rouge forces. In February this year news reached Var's village that Vietnamese troops were approaching. Soon after the Khmer soldiers fled, more than 100 Vietnamese and eight tanks arrived in the village.

### Escape

After a short stay, though, the liberating Vietnamese forces moved on, reassuring the anxious Cambodians left in the village that the Khmer Rouge would not return. Sadly, for the Cambodians, the Vietnamese had been falsely optimistic. Var had to hide in her house while the guerrillas made daytime sorties to the village, and after much heart-searching, she decided to escape to Thailand at the first opportunity.

That came on March 10th. Var told the Khmer Rouge stragglers passing through the village that she was going fishing. Var and her daughters Sokmale (11), and Panita (7), and sister Vyada Dar (22), cautiously made their way across the countryside to join up with around 200 more people from a nearby village.

Amazingly, this large group of refugees did not meet any guerrillas on the way, and 16 hours and 25 miles later, they finally crossed the Thai border. But there was no warm welcome waiting for them. Almost immediately, the Thai authorities sent the Cambodians back. All except Var, her two daughters and her sister. Var was suffering from anthrax, and with no medicines available in Cambodia, she was allowed to stay in a refugee camp hospital.

And from there – through the Ashe family – she and her family were allowed on compassionate grounds to resettle in England. A new life is opening up for them

