In 1975, the Khmer Rouge overthrew the government of Cambodia. Over the next four years, the communist political party embarked on a mission to radically alter the population of Cambodia. Party members believed all citizens should work together on collective farms, and anyone who did not agree or who did not fit into their new vision of society had to be eliminated. By 1979, an estimated two million people—over 20% of the population—had been killed, either worked to death or simply executed.

Now nearly four decades have passed since the Khmer Rouge was defeated by Vietnam in 1979, bringing an end to the genocide. Yet, new information is continually brought to light, and those who orchestrated the violence are only now being tried in a United Nations-assisted tribunal. Here, Hollie Nyseth Brehm talks to Keith Chhe, a survivor of the genocide.

**NYSETH BREHM:** Can you tell me about your life before the Khmer Rouge came to power?

**KEITH CHHE:** I was born in 1967 into a family of 12 children, so I was only a child before the Khmer Rouge came to power. Like the majority of Cambodia, my parents were very devout Buddhists. My dad was a judge, and my mom worked in business. My days were spent running around the house with my brothers and sisters. Our home was always filled with my cousins and neighbors. So, when we sat down to dinner, about 20 people would be seated around the table. It was wonderful—like a party every day.

**NYSETH BREHM:** How did life change when the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975?

**KEITH CHHE:** I remember mass chaos. Khmer Rouge soldiers took over cities, and their first order of business was to evacuate them. So, imagine you live in New York City, and suddenly a communist army takes over and institutes martial law. People carrying guns tell you that you must leave. And if you don’t cooperate, they just shoot you on the spot or burn your home to the ground.

**NYSETH BREHM:** That had to be so confusing as a child.

**KEITH CHHE:** I didn’t understand. I didn’t know why we had to leave or why we all were being pushed out of the city like cattle. We just kept walking, and thankfully, my family was able to stay together. We walked until we were in another province. There, the Khmer Rouge forced everyone to work in labor camps. They separated people by age and gender and sent them to perform different kinds of agricultural work. So some people were building dams, while others were working in rice fields or growing fruits and vegetables. We worked over 16 hours a day and were given little food. We were not allowed to grow our own food, as all land belonged to the government. If you tried to keep any of the food you harvested, members of the Khmer Rouge would kill you.

**NYSETH BREHM:** And what was your job?

**KEITH CHHE:** Between the ages of 8 and 12, my job was to raise cattle and take care of the water buffalo. We would take them out to graze during the day, and, at night, we would take them to the river to drink and bathe. Despite working such long hours and starving, some days almost felt normal. Other days we were reminded of what was happening because, at night, we would see dead bodies floating down the river as we were washing...
the water buffalos. Hundreds of floating bodies—sometimes even children, babies, or pregnant women. And we knew the Khmer Rouge had killed them somewhere upstream and pushed them down a cliff.

**NB:** Who was the Khmer Rouge targeting?

**KC:** The Khmer Rouge saw people as either “new people” or “old people.” The “new people” were the ones who were evacuated from cities to work in the country; these were typically well-educated people, business owners, people who were seen as having lighter skin, and former government employees. If you sided with the Americans during the Vietnam War, which was taking place in our neighboring country, you were also the enemy because you opposed communism. On the other hand, the “old people” had previously worked in the countryside as farmers. They were favored by the Khmer Rouge, and the Khmer Rouge recruited them to work for the government.

**NB:** And the government systematically killed the “new people”?

**KC:** Many people died of starvation working the fields, but others—particularly those who were educated above an 8th grade level or worked for the previous government—were killed systematically. There were even execution lists. Sometimes members of the Khmer Rouge took people to killing areas, such as trenches or cliffs. The method of execution there involved hitting people on the back of the head with an AK-47, hoe, or axe so as not to waste ammunition. They would shoot you if you tried to run, though.

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The rest of my family is in Cambodia, Canada, and the Czech Republic. We went from one big happy family around a dinner table to being broken. And to this day, we have yet to find out where the Khmer Rouge took my father and my two oldest brothers. We never found the place of their execution, so their remains [can] never be laid to rest.

NB: Beyond shattering your family, how have these events impacted your life today?
KC: It has been really hard to live apart from my family. But these events have motivated me to help others who were affected by the atrocities. The genocide took so many lives and has had lasting demographic effects on Cambodia. Out of 15 million people living there today, 50 percent are under the age of 22. That’s over 7 million young people who are in dire need of proper education. But, most families survive on less than one dollar per day—less than a small cup of coffee in our corner store.

CHHE: I serve on the board of directors of Global Children Cambodia, a nonprofit founded by Laura Sackler Tancredi. We help underserved children gain access to higher education and performing arts, thereby empowering Cambodia’s next generation. In fact, our mission reminds me of my father. Buddhist temples in Cambodia open their doors to all who seek refuge; and as young man, my father was allowed to live in the temple for free while pursuing higher education. This was the only way he was able to afford school, and it’s this spirit that motivates Global Children Cambodia. We provide meals, housing, health care, English education, computer education, motivation, and other support to the underserved Cambodian children.

NB: That’s amazing. Is there anything else you would like people to know?
KC: I will only say that I wish my nightmarish experience will never happen to another human being again. We must elevate education so that we all may live in peace and harmony. I believe that only through education, respect, love, kindness, and humility will we abolish genocides.

Hollie Nyseth Brehm is in the sociology department at The Ohio State University. She studies criminology, genocide, and international law and volunteers with the Center for Victims of Torture. Keith Chhe lives in upstate New York, where he owns a construction company and karate studio.