

Baylor records oral histories of genocide survivors

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WACO—As a little boy, Albert Cheng thrived in the lush jungle of Cambodia, playing and hunting rabbits and birds with slingshots and a bow and arrow. During peaceful times with his family, they walked together, holding hands.



Albert Cheng The lessons he learned in the jungle and his love for his family served him well years later. As a college student away from home in the 1970s, he joined hordes forced by the Khmer Rouge to evacuate from Phnom Penh. But he survived imprisonment and interrogation, escaping with others into the jungle he knew so well and staying alive by catching and eating monkeys and cobras.

“To be able to be right in the jungle again—it’s like, there’s my home,” Cheng said in a video interview.

The video and a transcript, detailing how he eventually fled to the United States and began a new life, are among firsthand accounts included in a project called “Survivors of Genocide” by Baylor University’s Institute for Oral History.

Fourteen genocide survivors interviewed

Researchers with the institute have created an online exhibit, conducting extensive interviews in the homes of 14 people who faced atrocities in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur and Burundi but managed to escape and immigrate to the United States.

The survivors' occupations ranged from rice farmer to electrical engineer to journalist, but their captors did not differentiate when it came to starving them, beating them or subjecting them to forced labor. Some, like Cheng, fled to jungles or mountains as children; others were prospering at careers before genocide shattered the world around them.

Today, they are scattered throughout Texas.

"This is amazing material of overcoming death, facing loss and fleeing to the United States," said Stephen Sloan, director of the Institute for Oral History and associate professor of history at Baylor. "The best way to understand the human experience of these horrific events is to encounter the stories of those the events touched most personally. Oral history gives us an effective approach to do this."

Among those who shared their stories with institute are:

- A former work camp prisoner from Cambodia who now serves Dallas as a police officer.
- A Fort Worth resident who lost his brother and father in mass executions during the war in Bosnia. He worked behind the scenes as a ham radio operator, aiding the United Nations in gathering information throughout the conflict.
- A Muslim woman in Bosnia who survived violence toward Muslims, working in a vegetable market and relying on her wits to survive. Ultimately, she found her daughter, separated from her by war, and they escaped, today living in Burleson.

- A writer and journalist from Darfur who lives in Houston and worked in the aftermath of militia attacks to document atrocities. He interviewed the displaced and injured, calling international attention to the ongoing violence.
- A San Antonio resident who suffered injury, abuse and forced labor at the hands of the Khmer Rouge before he escaped his native Cambodia and became a U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

To access the survivors' stories, click [here](#).

Cheng has experienced flashbacks to the horrors he endured, and he grieves over a sister who was executed. But he counts himself fortunate to have escaped the atrocities and been reunited with a brother and another sister. He also credits his faith, including a sense that he was being guided and comforted through danger.

“Without that faith, I won’t be what I am,” he says. “I won’t be as calm as I am today.

“I don’t understand yet, but beyond our own life here, there is another unseen life all around. When my body was exhausted, I remember the voice spoke clearly to me, ‘Get up and leave now.’ I turned around, like ‘Who is it?’ ... Even in the midst of hell and evil, there is some High Being somewhere.”