

The Story of Chanda Pich

Chanda Pich was eleven years old in 1975 when the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia. She spent the next four years working in labor camps, starving, and literally running for her life as the Khmer Rouge murdered more than 2 million Cambodians because of their education, their religion, their class, or their so-called ethnic “impurity.” APTP ensemble members interviewed Chanda along with her daughter, Chandy, who was born in 1983 while her mother lived in a refugee camp for killing fields survivors in Thailand. This is an excerpt about life in the Khmer Rouge labor camps from the story that Chanda shared with us.



Albany Park Theater Project

- Chanda:** ...After that, Khmer Rouge say, “You must move from city.” They told my mom go to one place and me go to another place. We separate. Sometime I miss my mom then I cried. Sometimes they had no food. A lot of people had big head and small body. [Chanda speaks in Khmer, the Cambodian language.]
- Chandy:** She said they ate porridge, but the Khmer Rouge only gave them three cups of rice with a bunch of water to feed the whole 50 to 60 people. So basically, it’s like rice and a bunch of water. That’s what the people would eat. Cause they didn’t have anything to eat.
- APTP:** You were with none of your other family? Your father was in Thailand? And your mom was in one village, but you were in another?
- Chanda:** Yeah, my mom stayed two or three day by walk.
- APTP:** Can you describe the labor camp?
- Chanda:** I stayed two or three hundred kids, you know. At five o’clock, six o’clock I go to work. [Chanda speaks in Khmer.]
- Chandy:** They would take the younger people to work doing farming for them and if they would steal the food they would kill them.
- Chanda:** They steal the food, they cut the hand, they kill them. Sometimes they die a lot. I go to sleep with a lot of people. Like two or three hundred kids. Then one night they die, one person. Sometime they die, two or three people because they don’t have something to eat, you know. They die, they smell, we sleep in there. It was potato farm. I work, but they don’t give me the food. That time I’m small. Very skinny. I’m scared. Maybe I think that I’m die. At night time, I have to steal something to eat because I’m so hungry. I steal something to eat. I’m so hungry. I steal and I look around and nobody, I steal. I steal something to eat. But not cook. Potato not cook. I just eat like that, you know. Some people coming and saw me steal. I think maybe I die. They saw me they say, “Okay, we don’t say nothing.” The person didn’t say some thing because they know me long time. One night I say, “I have something to eat,” two or three people come with me, they catch him. They hit him. The blood coming a lot.
- APTP:** Were any of your brothers and sisters in the same place you were?
- Chanda:** No. All by myself.
- My sister and my brother, one month they die. My mom no cry.
[Chanda speaks Khmer.]

Continued on next page

The Story of Chanda Pich continued

www.aptpchicago.org



Chandy: She said her mom can't cry, tears won't come out. You know, you see so many people die especially people close to you. It's her kids. She lost all her kids. She only had three out of nine left coming to America.

Chanda: One month, four people. My sister, my brother.

My older brother, he doctor so they kill him. Khmer Rouge kill him. If he live until now maybe he 67 years old. If you study only a little bit they had to kill you. Monk, teacher, if you learned something they killed you. You went to school, you're gonna get killed. The Khmer Rouge, they don't care, they kill you.

They separate me from the family. Then one night, I miss my mom, then I run away. I run away from the camp, then go to my mom. My mom, they far away from me. One day I said, "I don't care if I die, I die." I run. I run. I run and go to my mom. That day my father friend... [Chanda speaks in Khmer.]

Chandy: A commander, one of the leaders of the soldiers, he helped her out. Helped her out to escape and see my grandma.

Chanda: Yeah. They bring me to my mom. This home only small, you know. They have small, what they call –

Chandy: Straw house. Basically, it's one room, that's the house.

Chanda: But you cannot eat what you plant. If you steal it, they kill you. You plant something in the garden but you cannot steal it. They have a guy to see if you steal something. My sister, they steal it. They cut my sister. My sister, they said, "I had to steal my food." That's why I have to steal for my stomach. I had to steal it. One day, I saw a chicken coming like that. Then the food they give to me, I don't eat it. I killed chicken.

APTP: You killed the chicken yourself? How?

Chanda: I kill.

APTP: You fed the chicken the food that they gave you and then you ate the chicken?

Chanda: Yeah. I have to kill, you know. I have to kill like that. My sister, my brother, they don't have something to eat. So I have to steal. Before my sister and my brother don't die yet, I stole a chicken for them. They sickest of all people. They sick, they smaller. [Chanda speaks in Khmer.]

Chandy: They were skinny so they didn't have any energy and there would be like flies all over them because they're about to die. My mom, she can't do anything but steal other people's food to feed them and the rest of the family or else they all die. She had to choose and she chose her family. Her stomach, her life.

Chanda: I have to steal something for my sister. After they eat the chicken, my sister, my brother, they eat, they die.

Chandy: It was their last meal.

Chanda: And then they die. I saw in my eye they die like that. Eat this and then die. They said, "Mom, I'm going. I'm going." One week my sister die, another week, my brother die. No food. My mom she not cry. I'm not crying. What can you do? If you saw like that, what can you do? You cannot cry because I don't have something to cry.

Chandy: You don't have the energy to cry.

Chanda: What can you cry? If you saw, you don't know what you can do. What can you do? You think maybe I'm die soon. It be me another day.