

Childhood fight for survival fuels Novartis investigator ^[1]

Discovery ^[2]

Forty years later, Cambodian-born Sokhom Pin still has nightmares about what he endured as a child. In one recurring dream, he visits Cambodia, and, once again, the Khmer Rouge has taken over and is shooting people in the streets. Pin runs around all night, desperately searching for the US embassy. Then he wakes up in a sweat . . . in a comfortable house in Lunenburg, MA, with his wife and children nearby. He takes a deep breath and gets ready for work as an investigator in ophthalmology at the Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research (NIBR).

Pin, who has published two dozen research papers, is working on diabetic retinopathy and age-related macular degeneration (AMD). Pin has worked at NIBR for six years and has gained recognition for research excellence in 2009 through 2013. Over time, his colleagues began learning about his incredible history. A good friend once told him, “I’m going to stop complaining about anything to you – because you can always top it.” The story of Pin and his family is a story of utter determination.

Pin’s father was born a peasant. A few years after serving in the Cambodian army, he moved the family to a suburb of Phnom Penh, where the government was giving away land north of the city. Pin’s father acquired land and soon bought more; within two years, he accumulated a fortune. When cash became too much to hide or carry, and while the country was still relatively stable, Pin’s father started buying diamonds, which were sewn into the sleeves of their shirts and the hems of their pants.

There were seven children living at home when the Khmer Rouge invaded – shelling, dropping bombs, killing people at random. The family went to stay with relatives in the city, where there was less fighting. The next morning, the parents left for their suburban home to check on their animals. Two hours after they left, Cambodian soldiers ran into the house where the children were staying, followed by the Khmer Rouge, who were chasing and shooting the soldiers. The kids went into hiding in the basement, and the Khmer Rouge said they had to evacuate at once. “They created a one-way street back to the country,” remembers Pin, who was eight. “My older brother of 19 and my oldest sister of 18 acted as our parents as we walked for days to get to the family farm, 40 miles away.”

When Pin and his siblings reached the house in the country, they had a joyful reunion with their parents. But soon after their arrival, their father’s six brothers walked by, tied up in a line, crying and saying goodbye, on their way to their execution because they had once been soldiers. A week later, Pin’s family was moved by train to Battambang province, the last stop on the railway line. Then they were marched to a labor camp in the jungle and left there with no water, no food.



Sokhom Pin is an investigator in ophthalmology research at Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research.

Before they fled, his father had made a huge roll of dough with sugar and wrapped it in banana leaves. “It tasted terrible,” says Pin, “but it probably saved our lives.” There were 50,000 people abandoned in the jungle, and soon they began to die off. The expectation was that everyone would starve to death, and about half the people did.

At night, Pin’s parents would sneak out of the camp, risking death, and go to the nearest Khmer Rouge town to trade diamonds. Sometimes they traded a diamond for a spoonful of rice, or for water that had washed some rice. “We were a bunch of kids lying in shelters like baby birds waiting for food,” recalls Pin. “I would pass out and my parents would drip a few drops of the starchy rice water into my mouth.”

The Khmer Rouge wanted Cambodia to return to its eleventh century supremacy, which was based upon rice, and they leveled the suburbs so they could grow rice everywhere. They considered everyone except farmers useless and vowed to create a society with no rich and no poor. Under their rule, you were allowed only two possessions: a spoon and a plate.

The Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia for four brutal years before the Vietnamese army threw them out. Pin’s family made its way to a refugee camp in Thailand, after they were informed by a person who knew the family about a letter on a bulletin board from their oldest son, who had escaped to the US. They decided to join him. The night before their departure, Pin’s father was severely beaten and robbed of his remaining diamonds. The Pin family, as well as three orphans they had unofficially adopted, arrived in the US knowing no English, having no skills, and owning no possessions. They lived on welfare and food stamps. They settled into a one-bedroom apartment in a small town, Havre de Grace, MD, where, as Pin recollects, “the people had never seen Asians before. We were the poorest people in town. But I had brought an old Cambodian/English dictionary, and I carried it with me all the time.”

His parents exhorted the children, “We brought you here, you’re safe here, so get educated, be doctors or lawyers.” Pin decided to be a doctor, so his teacher gave him a pamphlet about it. “It took me three days with my dictionary to read one page, but I was determined.”

Pin graduated from La Roche College in Pittsburgh and became a research technician at Johns Hopkins. Then he worked at DuPont Pharmaceuticals and Bristol-Meyers Squibb. At the same time, he was studying at the University of Connecticut. After he got his doctorate in pharmacology, he joined NIBR, where his fortitude has served him well.

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In research, things don’t always work out as planned. An experiment’s results can shut down – or expand – a particular program, and knowing the high stakes can be very stressful. Sometimes a problem occurs and you have to pause an experiment in order to solve the problem, and additional work piles up. “I would eventually solve the issue and catch up with other work,” says Pin, “and my early experiences helped motivate me to work hard and never give up. When I get too stressed out, a memory of what I had to do and the risks I had to take make me realize I’m already living way beyond my childhood fantasy, which was to have enough to eat for the rest of my life.”

Life under the Khmer Rouge and his poverty in Havre de Grace taught him that “if I focus on objectives, there will always be ways around obstacles.” Once or twice, when he felt he was losing motivation, his memories of hardship kept him “working hard to achieve what NIBR brought me here to do: Help improve the lives of people with ocular diseases.”

Pin spends his weekends drawing, painting, fishing, and coaching soccer. He is also a frequent speaker about the Khmer Rouge and the killing fields. In the thirty-odd years since his family fled the country, Cambodia has become a popular tourist destination, praised for its beauty and cuisine. But Sokhom Pin has no plans to go back. He goes back, involuntarily, often enough in his dreams.

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