

A decade of tears

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Chantara Nop is overwhelmed by the reunion with Young Trak, the mother he had to leave 10 years ago.

CHAPTER II: REUNION AT LAST

Editor's note: Chantara Nop, like many of the 40,000 Cambodian refugees in Long Beach, is torn between his native Cambodia and his adopted home in the United States. Yet, fearful they will be persecuted or killed if they return to their homeland, no more than half a

dozen have bridged the two worlds.

Nop, 34, is one who did. Ten years after he escaped, the Long Beach social adjustment counselor returned to Cambodia in February, accompanied by a Press-Telegram reporter and photographer.



Nop, 34, said of his mother, 76, "She look too old and it hurt me."

Chantara Nop broke into lusty song as the blue van veered around ox carts, slammed through potholes, advanced closer and closer to his mother, his destination, his dream.

The pale blue sky was huge, billowing with gray and white clouds.

"Look at the sky!" Nop shouted, oblivious to clouds. "Now it's clear!"

Nop, a 34-year-old Long Beach counselor, was getting closer and closer to Phnom Penh, where he would see his mother and two sisters for the first time since he escaped from Cambodia 10 years ago.

He had waited months for his visas, and after leaving Los Angeles he had endured another endless week in airports and hotels. Fearful he would be captured and killed, he had warily confronted customs officials and

CAMBODIAN ODYSSEY

RETURN TO THE KILLING FIELDS

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border guards. There would be more anguish when he reached Phnom Penh, just 4½ hours away.

But as he greedily gazed at his homeland, Nop was simply enthralled.

CAMBODIAN ODYSSEY

REUNION AT LAST



Distraught that his family had left after waiting for him at his sister's Phnom Penh apartment for 10 days, Nop agonizes as sister Bopriek offers incense to the family shrine.



Nop and sister Bopriek, 33, didn't have time for goodbyes when he fled Cambodia in 1979.



Nop's niece, Saphary Port, 19, sobs uncontrollably at the sight of her uncle.

“I don't believe that I'm in Cambodia! ... I love Cambodia! This is my home.”

— Chantara Nop

FROM/A1

He stared at the tawny thatched houses, the pinkish mud houses, the russet wooden houses on stilts brushed by mango trees and banana trees and cashew trees. He stared at the empty beige rice fields stretched across an immense horizon, like an African savanna or a Palm Springs desert with matchstick palm trees pricking the incandescent sky.

“I don't believe that I'm in Cambodia!” he yelled.

Two clowns danced down a village road, and the driver hit the van's brakes, then backed up to the festival. A monk stood in the street; Nop bowed his head and received a blessing. Then he joined the cavorting clowns and an old man who spun around and around to the hypnotic beat of a drum.

Back into the van, into a new province.

“Now we're leaving Long Beach, coming into Lakewood,” joked Nop, a social adjustment counselor with a Long Beach service agency for refugees.

Past huge green lily pads with pink flowers on murky ponds. Past slender swaths of lime green rice plants. Closer and closer.

Finally, at 3:15 p.m., almost nine hours after leaving Ho Chi Minh City, the van pulled onto a wide, palm-lined boulevard in the capital. Last stop: Motel Cambodiana.

Nop plunged out of the van and ran over to a man on a motorcycle. He was home, finally home, and he had to let his mother know. She had no phone, so he begged the motorcyclist to deliver the message.

“Tell my mother I will be there soon,” he said, handing him an address and some money.

The messenger roared off.

Nop rushed into his motel room, took a shower and changed from his stone-washed jeans into slick gray slacks and a shiny white shirt. At 4:30 p.m., he was sitting in a pedicab, his address book open on his lap.

Technically, he was a foreigner. He had criticized the government and he had fled. He didn't really know if it was safe to ride through the streets of Phnom Penh by himself. He didn't really care.

“I love Cambodia!” he exclaimed as he was pedaled along wide boulevards of the city. “This is my home.”

It was a long ride, and Nop kept checking his address book. His mother lived with his sister in an apartment he had never seen. As he passed the university where he used to study, he said, “Very close.” He peered at unfamiliar homes. “A little farther, I think.”

The driver pedaled on. Closer and closer.

Suddenly, Nop ordered the cyclist to stop and dashed into a bamboo house. He emerged with a Coke. “Too thirsty,” he explained as the driver pedaled on.

Finally, Nop spotted his sister's husband standing with a camera in front of a two-story concrete apartment building. He jumped out of the pedicab and grabbed him. Then he looked toward the dingy white building.

His 33-year-old sister, Bopriek, stood at the foot of the stairs. He froze, threw his hands over his head and stared at his sister for the first time since she saved his life in the middle of the night 10 years ago.

She wore a short-sleeved red sweater and a long gold and black striped skirt. She was thin, too thin, he thought.

She ran toward him, her black hair flying, her face contorted by excruciating joy. He stood stark still, afraid she would knock him down if he even flinched. She hurled herself into his arms. They clung to each other, sobbing.

He tried to walk to the house. Overcome, he slid onto a bench. His sister helped him up, walked him up the stairs to her sparse apartment, where he collapsed on a chair, put his head in his hands and wept.

His mother was not there. Inconsolable, he leaned his head against a window and cried. He sat on a metal cot and cried. He couldn't stop, couldn't talk. His mother was not there.

He finally lighted a cigarette and took a quavering drag.

CONTINUED/A5



After the tears of joy dried, Nop clowned with his mother and the family he knew he'd have to leave again.

“My nephew has no shirt. He walk in barefoot. It hurt me much. This is the way my family live now ... The responsibility is with me. I have to feed them. I send money, but it is not enough.”

— Chantara Nop



Photos of Nop's family, some of whom were killed by the Khmer Rouge, are a painful reminder of the hell from which he escaped.

FROM/A4

“My sister said my family just left day before yesterday,” he said. “They all wait in here for too long.”

Uncertain when Nop would arrive, his relatives had begun camping out at his sister's apartment 10 days earlier. When he didn't come, they left.

But his mother wasn't far away. She was attending a local Buddhist ceremony. Someone went to get her.

As he waited, Nop stared at the family photographs tacked to one wall.

“There's my brother,” he said. “He die. There's my father when he was young — 38, about my age. This is my brother who die. This is also one of him.”

His thoughts drifted back to the present.

“She's so skinny, my sister now,” he said sadly.

He lighted three sticks of incense with his cigarette lighter and said a prayer.

Nop started down the stairs to wait outside for his mother. His 19-year-old niece, Saphary Port, was on her way up. He gave her a sorrowful smile; she responded with a frozen stare. Then she collapsed on the stairs in sobs, spilling her armload of books. He helped her up and embraced her. Together, they wept.

He picked up her books, handed them to her and she stumbled blindly into the apartment. He went downstairs and squatted among the banana trees, smoking a cigarette and sipping a Heineken, waiting.

Relatives kept arriving, and a crowd on motorcycles and bicycles gathered outside, staring in confusion and wonderment at the drama. Wood fires scented the twilight.

“Pu, Pu!” Nop cried, using the Cambodian word for uncle. He ran to an old man and picked him up.

Suddenly, a tiny old woman flew out of nowhere into his arms. Nop fell to his knees and bowed at her feet, his head touching the ground again and



A decade of separation ends as Nop is reunited with his mother and uncle. “I am so happy,” said Young Trak. Her four other sons were killed by the Khmer Rouge.

again. She, too, sank to the ground. Sobbing, he lifted her up and drew her close.

His mother.

Locked together, tears streaming down their faces, they climbed the stairs to the apartment. Young Trak, 76, sat on the metal cot, touching the hair, stroking the face of her only surviving son.

Nop's niece knelt at his feet,

sobbing once more. He took off his glittering gold chain and clasped it around her trembling neck.

His mother leaned against his shoulder, clung to his arm. It was stifling in the small apartment, now jammed with 40 people. A young man cooled Nop with a lavender fan; his mother wiped his sweating face with a cloth.

She told him how she'd worried

about him. She told him he was too skinny.

He said he'd worried about her, too, and as she caressed him, his joy was tinged with sorrow.

“She change much,” he said. “She too old, not like before. She broke her teeth. She look too old, and it hurt me to think she cannot do anything, and I don't stay near her and she get older and older and older.”

Other changes also gnawed at his happiness.

“I open the pot of rice,” he said. “It's red, and I understand this is the poor quality. Our family never eat that rice. Now the situation require all these people to eat this.”

“My nephew has no shirt,” he continued. “He walk in barefoot. It hurt me much. This is the way my family live now.”

He felt guilty as he remembered the promise he'd made to his dying father, whose photo was tacked to the wall of his sister's modest apartment.

“The responsibility is with me,” he thought. “I have to feed them. I send money, but it is not enough. I just left her behind ...”

That guilt would torment him throughout his 12-day visit. There would be more pain as he trudged through a prison where thousands had been tortured, as he stared at their skulls in a killing field that could have claimed his four murdered brothers.

But today was not a day to dwell on the dead. The tears subsided, and his mother and sister changed into lace blouses and long gold and burgundy flowered skirts. It was time for family photos, and Nop danced from one person to the next, gaily thrusting his video camera into their smiling faces.

“I am so happy,” his mother said in Cambodian. “I'm very excited to see my son. There's nothing to compare it.”

She thought for a second.

“It is like a diamond,” she said. “A big one.”

CAMBODIAN ODYSSEY

REUNION AT LAST

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Nop's relatives open their arms, hearts

STORY BY SUSAN PACK
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRUCE CHAMBERS

Sandals were always strewn at the door of his motel, always scattered at the door of his sister's apartment.

"I go there, people wait for me," said Chantara Nop. "I go here, people wait for me. Wait there, wait here, wait there. I don't know how to choose my station. I have to share my body in piece now, chop my body in piece."

During his first visit home in a decade, the 34-year-old Long Beach counselor for a Cambodian social services agency was definitely in demand.

Nop didn't spend all his time with his family. He couldn't. He was assigned a government guide and required to follow her "program," which included a visit to a killing field and a prison.

"They live abroad," explained Chivorn Noun, another government guide. "They need to know the politics of the government."

If Nop hadn't followed the program, he could have been barred from ever entering the country again.

Yet, after a few days, his guide pretty much left him alone. He met with the ministers of culture and education. He spelled a pedicab driver. He fulfilled his childhood dream of riding an elephant in a park at the center of Phnom Penh on a broiling Sunday afternoon.

When he was a boy, the proletariat was forbidden to climb aboard the beast.

"Those rides just only for king family," he said. "I want to be king family. The king and I."

But Nop spent most of his time with his relatives, who kept bursting into tears.

"When I get out of car, they cry and cry," he said. "It like funeral. They just cry from missing me."

His sister-in-law cried when she read letters from her two sons. Nop had brought the young men from a refugee camp to Long Beach. Now he brought their mail and photos to their mother.

The tears dried quickly, though, and Nop relished his role of family patriarch.

His suitcase became Santa's bag, a magician's hat. He pulled out a Walkman, calculator, Levi's jacket, Martin Luther King shirt — and gave them all away. Eventually, his shiny black Screen Actors Guild jacket went, too.

Looking like the Pied Piper, Nop led 17 relatives down the sweltering street to a cafe for lunch one day. Beneath a soothing ceiling fan, he ordered bubbling chicken soup, beef with green peppers and rice. He split a Heineken with his mother.

"This is my dream," he said contentedly surveying the crowd.

The government wouldn't allow Nop to spend the night at his sister's apartment. But his relatives stayed at his motel.



Visiting Chantara Nop in his Phnom Penh motel room, his mother, Young Trak, flips through a photo album of the California grandchildren she has never seen.

"When I get out of car, they cry and cry and cry. It like funeral. They just cry from missing me."

— Chantara Nop



Nop's sister-in-law, who cooked and brought in his meals to his Phnom Penh motel room, takes time out for a game of cards with him.

"Did you know these beds can hold five people?" he asked.

He slept no more than two hours a night, on his back, his arms outstretched, a niece or a sister-in-law clinging to each one.

"They roll me," he said.

First, one would talk to him, then the other. He rolled onto one side, then the other, back and forth throughout the night.

But he didn't mind, especially when he looked into the eyes of the sister-in-law who looked like his wife, Kimberly.

"I don't feel too homesick," he said. "It's Kim, Kim, Kim. It's my wife's spirit."

Those who didn't spend the night began arriving as early as 4 a.m., laden with bunches of green bananas and silver containers filled with noodles or rice.

"The whole province come," Nop said. "They say I come back to live in here. I say never."

Yet, he was torn, filled with remorse.

"I stop in there and make them missing me," he said. "I just go, leave them behind. I feel a lot of guilt."

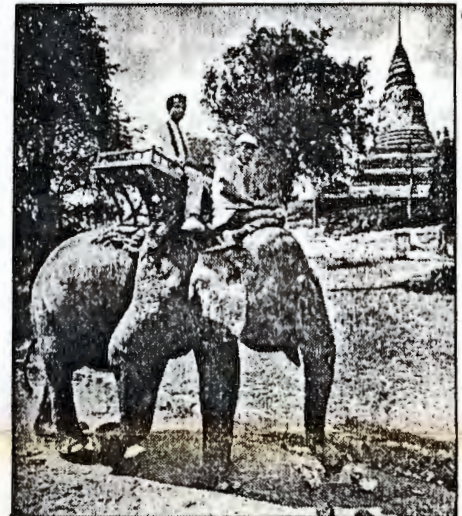
"But I have to go. Without me in America, it be hard for my wife, my son, my daughter. So it seems like I have two Nop families. Now two."

Whenever he thought about leaving his Cambodian family, his hands flew to his face in despair.

"First there is the dream," he said. "Then the nightmare."



Visitors' shoes pile up outside the door as Nop's extended family gathers for lunch with him.



At a central Phnom Penh shrine, Nop fulfills his boyhood wish to ride an elephant, an activity once limited to Cambodian royalty.

SUNDAY

Chapter I:

The journey begins

■ Excruciating delays, dashed hopes and tense encounters with armed border guards face Chantara Nop as he attempts to be reunited with his family in Cambodia after fleeing 10 years ago.

TODAY

Chapter II:

Reunion at last

■ Ten years and thousands of miles dissolve as Chantara Nop arrives in Phnom Penh and begins an anxious search for his mother and other loved ones.

TUESDAY

Chapter III:

The faces of death

■ The Cambodian victims of genocide haunt visitors at the chilling sites of torture and murder. Were Chantara Nop's four brothers among them?

WEDNESDAY

Chapter IV:

The agonizing farewell

■ Chantara Nop's return to his mother and his homeland ends in a sea of tears as he bids goodbye to anguished relatives he may never see again.