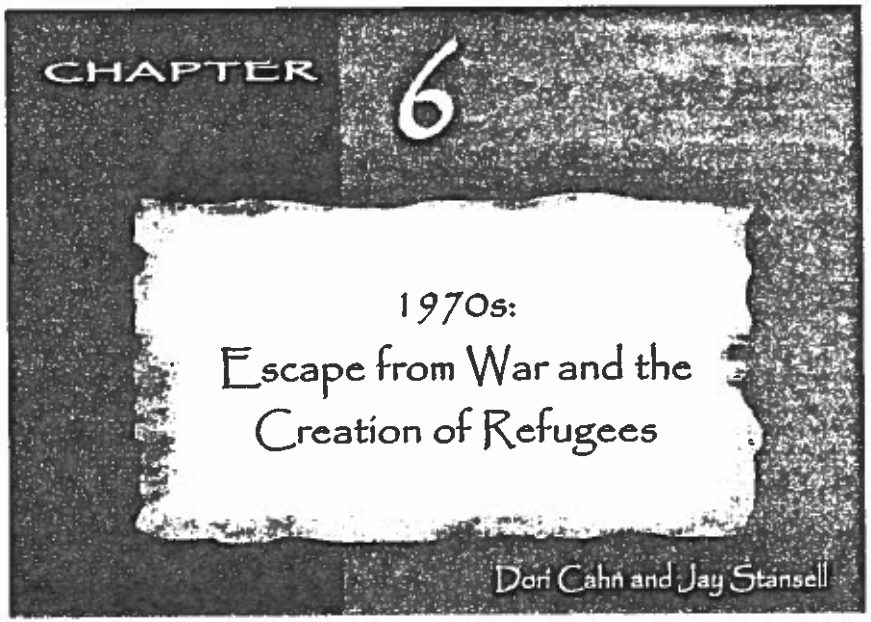

As Southeast Asia was imploding during the 1970s, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Laotians were escaping their countries' borders by any means possible. Walking through fields of land mines, floating on anything resembling a boat, refugees flowed into other parts of Southeast Asia. Refugee camps mushroomed along the Thai borders, while some refugees made their way to Malaysia and Indonesia.

In Cambodia, the demise of the national government in 1975 was followed by four years of unimaginable terror under the Khmer Rouge. Millions of people were displaced, particularly from urban areas, and forced to live in "collective" rural camps where the displaced experienced the day-to-day possibility of arbitrary brutal death, torture, or starvation. Survivors have attempted to detail the depth of brutality and terror that defined life under the rule of the Khmer Rouge (see especially Him 2000; and Ung 2000; for descriptions of children living in Cambodia during these years; see also Ngor 1987; Pran 1997). Dr. Haing Ngor dedicates his 1987 memoir to the memories of his parents and wife, who "died in the most miserable, uncivilized, and inhuman ways under the Khmer communist regime." Another survivor describes his childhood experiences:

> I saw my mother's tears glistening in the dim light of dying bonfire. A farm labor overseer had just ordered fifteen children to kick me. I was seven. Each child was to kick me five times, and my mother could do nothing to stop it.... My mother's tears. Endless labor without pay. Hunger. Beatings. Executions. These are the memories I have of my childhood in Cambodia during the holocaust of the Khmer Rouge (Darith Keo, in Pran, 1997).

The most horrifying aspect to survivors is the fact that other Cambodians were the perpetrators of the atrocities—unlike the holocaust visited upon Jews by the Nazis during World War II or the "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia or the tribal rivalries between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda in the 1990s. In fact, the term "autogenocide" was coined specifically to refer to the situation of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, where atrocities were committed by members of a single social and ethnic group on its own members (Chung 2000).

By the time the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia and took over its governing powers in 1979 (a point in time referred to by survivors as the "liberation"), as much as one quarter of the population had died by starvation, illness, or execution as a result of the Khmer Rouge policies and political purges. Thousands of those remaining fled the country in the days and months following the Vietnamese takeover. Most of these came from the northwestern part of the country. Closest to the border of Thailand, where escape by foot was possible.

In Thai refugee camps, those who fled Cambodia were generally safer than in their home, but they were still subject to atrocities. In one well-documented incident, Thai soldiers forced close to 45,000 Cambodian refugees down a steep cliff face, back across the border into the Khmer Rouge minefields that they had all managed to avoid on their escape to Thailand (Kamm 1998). Other refugees

speak of harassment, extortion, exploitation, and assault by Thai soldiers (Him 2000; Kamm 1998).

As thousands of people jammed camps that Thailand grudgingly allowed within its borders, the international community, and in particular the United States, recognized the need for an organized process that would allow refugees to escape while preventing Thailand from being overwhelmed. The policies applied to Southeast Asian refugees were the product of decades of public policy debate in the United States regarding the treatment of those fleeing war and terror throughout the world.

The United States' experience with massive numbers of war refugees prior to the end of World War II was fairly limited. Even during the war, when many Jews were desperate to flee the pogroms and Nazi roundups throughout Eastern Europe, the United States refused to increase its immigration quotas to accept these refugees (Simon Wiesenthal Center 1997). After the end of the war, "[m]uch of the impetus for new American and international efforts...derived from the recognition that pre-war efforts, especially on behalf of Jewish refugees, were shamefully inadequate" (Aleinikoff et al. 1998).

Following World War II, the international community established two important international treaties, the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, in 1951, and, in the face of the worsening situation in Southeast Asia, the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1967 (Goodwin-Gill 1996). Initially, post-World War II refugee policies in the Unites States allowed entrance of refugees as parolees with no permanent status, but it quickly became apparent that this approach was inadequate, as "refugee problems" did not dissipate in the years following the war. In 1965, the United States institutionalized refugee admissions as one of the several categories of noncitizens to allow into the United States on a fluctuating and numerical basis. But this approach too proved inadequate, particularly in the face of the exodus of refugees from Southeast Asia in the 1970s. Congress then passed the Refugee Act of 1980, establishing the legal framework that is largely still in place today (Aleinikoff et al. 1998).

The 1980 act repealed the congressionally controlled numerical limits of the refugee laws of 1965 and replaced them with a

provision for the president to establish yearly ceilings on refugee admissions. The act defined a refugee as a person who fears return to his or her home country because of a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Under the act, 50,000 Southeast Asian refugees a year were allowed into the United States during the first few years, a ceiling that could be raised by the president. In the first year alone, President Carter agreed to accept 166,700 Southeast Asians for resettlement in the United States (Smith-Hefner 1999).

The increase of admissions from Cambodia was particularly dramatic. From 1952 until 1974, there were a recorded 390 nonrefugee immigrant arrivals in the United States from Cambodia. In the 5 years between 1975, the year of the Khmer Rouge takeover, and the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, about 13,000 Cambodian refugees were admitted to the United States. In the first year alone after the act's passage, refugee arrivals grew to 16,000, followed by a peak of more than 38,000 the following year. Overall, between 1975 and 1999, there were a total of 145,149 Cambodian refugees who arrived in the United States, with an additional 42,000 nonrefugee arrivals recorded in the same period (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center [SEARAC] 2002b; Smith-Hefner 1999). The 2000 census counts a total of 206,000 people claiming single or combined Cambodia ethnicity.

The earlier refugees from Southeast Asia that came before the Refugee Act of 1980 was implemented were generally urban and well educated. The Cambodians who came in this period mainly had worked for the U.S. government or had otherwise been involved in the war effort. The later, larger wave, between 1980 and 1987, when the bulk of Cambodians arrived, tended to be rural and less educated, in part because the purges conducted by the Khmer Rouge were targeted at the educated, professional, and urban residents (Smith-Hefner 1999).

Initially, U.S. domestic resettlement policies were intended to disperse refugees throughout the country so that no one community would be overburdened. Often these placements were based purely on wherever sponsors were available. However, the refugees would

frequently move on from their initial placements to join family members or friends, or to move from uncomfortable climates (Smith-Hefner 1999). Government policy was later changed to concentrate resettlement in locations where housing and jobs were available and where services could be distributed more centrally. These locations were all medium to large urban environments (Fadiman 1997). The Cambodians faced a process of resettlement and establishing new communities that were different from the Vietnamese communities in the United States, many of which were established by better educated and more prosperous refugees fleeing before the end of the war in 1975; these communities were able to absorb the later wave of rural and less skilled refugees into their midst (Elliot 1999; Nguyen 1994; Office of the Surgeon General 1999).

Federal funding was provided to assist refugees upon their arrival in the United States. Refugees were given language classes, job training, and housing and employment assistance. Many then found their way into minimum wage jobs. However, there was generally little to no follow-up. In fact, although the Refugee Act of 1980 authorized reimbursement to states for assistance, the number of months allowed was continually cut in subsequent years (Jung 1993). Moreover, the length of assistance varied from state to state, with as little as 4 months in states such as New York. Assistance networks were severely strained by the huge influx of refugees throughout the 1980s while sources of funding were decreasing (Bass 1996).

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