



Loung Ung

Lucky Child
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How much did your sister, Chou, participate in the composition of the chapters in *Lucky Child* that involve her experiences in Cambodia?

Since our first reunion in 1995, I have returned more than 25 times to Cambodia to see Chou and my family. Over the years, Chou and I have spent many hours talking and sharing our lives with each other. Though I was the primary writer of *Lucky Child*, Chou gave much of her time, love, and energy to its birth. Chou was incredibly supportive, loving, and forgiving of me when I had to ask her to recall painful memories to help me write the book. There were also times when she was less than pleased with me, especially when I followed her like a shadow, watching, taking pictures, observing her every move, asking her to repeat her story or to brush her hair again so I could capture her. *Lucky Child* is

my best attempt to piece together Chou's story from our numerous conversations, interviews with family members and neighbors, and our many literal and emotional walks down the memory lanes of our childhoods. When I gave her the first draft, I told her she had final editing power. Fortunately for me, she loved what I wrote.

In the years in which you lived in Vermont and your family lived in Cambodia and you were unable to communicate with each other, what sustained you emotionally?

Good friends, good food, bright starry nights, my books, a stirring photograph, good movie, school plays . . . I have so many favorite things in life. Of course, hindsight is 20/20. During my teenage years, I probably didn't appreciate all these things nearly enough.

Whether or not I was conscious of their importance in my life, they were there. They inspired me, kept me busy, gave me love and laughter. Growing up, there were years when I was hurting and full of hate, and yet, little by little, all these wonderful small miracles of life happened to me — friendship, hope, education, love, learning to read, speaking French, writing letters to my mother, the births of my nieces — every day they happened and I didn't recognize them. I am working hard to see them all clearly now. My favorite quote is from Albert Einstein — "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

You self-identify as the "*Lucky Child*" in your family because of your opportunity to relocate from Cambodia to America: To what extent has your appreciation of your good fortune been accompanied by feelings of guilt, which tend to be extremely common to survivors of tragedies?

The day I was chosen over Chou to come to America was one of the most joyful and heartbroken days in my life. I was so excited to leave Cambodia, the genocide, and the war behind but to do that, I had to leave my beloved sister. I felt guilty about this for many years, especially in my younger, teenage years. When I was going through normal teenager stuff like wanting to spend money on a beautiful dress for the prom, I would chastise myself for being vain and selfish and not thinking about my poor sister in Cambodia: When I got a bad grade in school, I would beat myself up emotionally because I wasn't just living my life, I had to live it for my sister and family. I think I felt guilty about everything. At times, that guilt was suffocating.

Throughout *Lucky Child*, you refer to teachers and peers who encouraged you to write about your life story. To what extent did they influence your decision to become a writer?

I don't think I would be a writer without them. I want to take this opportunity to give a loud thank you "shout out" to all the book lovers, librarians, and English teachers out there. To my friend Linda who introduced me to the world of books, this wonderful world where I could travel through time, countries, universes, be Nancy Drew, and fight alongside Frodo. A writer is first and foremost a reader. To the librarian who gave me the award for checking the most books out — you made me feel proud instead of ashamed for being a bookworm. And to the English teachers — words were only letters joined together until you showed me the complexities, shades, tones, and stories in them. You all gave me the gift of books and taught me to love the written word, and that made all the difference in my writing life.

What do you hope *Lucky Child* will convey to survivors of other genocides?

When I arrived in America, though I had left the war physically far behind, in my mind, the soldiers were still chasing to kill me, my stomach was always hungry, and my fear and distrust kept me from opening up to new friendships. I thought the war was over when I left Cambodia, but I realize now that for survivors and all those involved, the war is never over just because the guns have fallen silent. At first, instead of bullets fired from a soldier's rifle, I'd hear guns in the boom of fireworks, the loud kick of a car engine, or the pop of party balloons. Then at a turning point in my life, I decided that the soldiers would always win if I let my life be ruled by fear. I had spent years running away from the soldiers and the war. I was afraid that if I cried, I would never stop. I was afraid I was not strong enough to face the soldiers. To all the survivors out there, I want them to know that we are stronger and more resilient than we ever knew. We survived, that should be enough but it isn't. We must work hard to become whole again, to fill our soul with love and inspiration, to live the life that was intended for us before it was disrupted by war and horrors, and help rebuild a world that is better than the one we had just left. I believed this is the ultimate triumph, to not just survive wars but to thrive in peace, and to work for peace. That is something the soldiers would not want from us. And in the end, we would not only win over the war, (yes, the best revenge is success!) but we will be left stronger for it.