

**An Instructor's Guide to
First They Killed My Father
by Loung Ung**

Note to Teachers

Themes: war, political oppression, survival, family relationships

“From 1975 to 1979—through execution, starvation, disease, and forced labor—the Khmer Rouge systematically killed an estimated two million Cambodians, almost a fourth of the country’s population.

This is a story of survival: my own and my family’s. Though these events constitute my experience, my story mirrors that of millions of Cambodians. If you had been living in Cambodia during this period, this would be your story too.”—author’s note

Until the age of five, Loung Ung lived in Phnom Penh, one of seven children of a high-ranking government official. She was a precocious child who loved the open city markets, fried crickets, chicken fights, and sassing her parents. When Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge army stormed into Phnom Penh in April 1975, Ung's family was forced to flee their home and hide their previous life of privilege. Eventually, they dispersed in order to survive. Loung was trained as a child soldier in a work camp for orphans while her other siblings were sent to labor camps. Only after the Vietnamese destroyed the Khmer Rouge were Loung and her surviving siblings slowly reunited.

First They Killed My Father is a heart-wrenching historical autobiography that recounts the brutality of war with vivid detail. A story of political oppression in Cambodia, it is all the more striking and intense as it is told from the perspective of a child, one who is thrust into situations that she doesn't understand, as she is only five years old when the terror begins. Loung Ung made many difficult journeys during her Cambodian youth, starting with being evacuated from her hometown of Phnom Penh. More meaningful were the journeys of self, which led her from a life as the child of a large and privileged family to that of an orphan and work camp laborer. From the deaths of her parents and sisters, we get a glimpse of the power that family relationships have in our lives. From the loss of economic status, the ways in which our social class can define our days is drawn in sharper relief. From her growing knowledge of the regime that has caused her to suffer, we learn of the vast gulf that often exists between a government's intentions and its actions, between words and deeds.

Ung’s memoir offers an account of the warping effects that war can have on an individual, as well as of the possibility of survival and triumph through seemingly insurmountable adversity. We learn of the daily difficulties that come with an atmosphere of political instability-how neighbors cannot trust one another, how common people become executioners, how a political regime can value the acquisition of weapons before feeding its own people, and the tragedy that necessarily follows. The result is a book of incredible power which demonstrates more than the will to survive of a small child, more than the forces in her life that sustained her through feelings of rage, love, and guilt to a life of activism against global forces of violence. A history of war that may not be on many American’s radar screens, Ung’s recollections are a chilling testament to what happens when a political movement becomes invulnerable to reason in its quest for power, and also of the ability of the human spirit to endure the harshest conditions.

Loung Ung is the National Spokesperson for the “Campaign for a Landmine Free World,” a program of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation. VVAF founded the International Campaign to Ban Landmines which was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997. Ung lectures extensively throughout the United States.

Questions for classroom discussion

What fundamental problems existed in the Khmer Rouge’s plan that caused the destruction of so many lives? Were there any values that the Khmer Rouge claimed to hold that you share?

What impact did the narrator’s child’s voice have on your experience as a reader? How would you characterize the transformation that takes place in her narrative voice throughout the story?

How did it affect your reading of the book that you were aware of Loung's father's impending death long before she was?

Would you describe Loung as a feminist? How did the experiences of the Ung family members differ during the war because of gender?

What was your impression of the final separation, both geographic and cultural, that Loung had with her surviving family? Did you sympathize with her eventual desire to assimilate into American culture, or had you expected her to be more aggressive about pursuing her family relationships earlier on?

Loung saw herself as a "strong" person, as did many other people in the book, and was eventually drafted into a soldier training camp as a result. What are the qualities of a survivor? How does one reconcile compassion with a will to survive? What qualities enabled her gentle sister Chou to survive as well?

With armed struggle a reality of life for people all over the world both past and present, how does one draw the line as to which means are ethical and unethical for coping with it, such as the author's current campaign against the use of landmines? Are there other tools of war that you believe should be broadly banned?