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'New Year Baby' Documents Khmer Rouge Survivors

by [Anna Almendrala](#) 05-21-2008

On Christmas Day a few years ago in Dallas, Texas, Socheata Poeuv's parents called a family meeting to tell her that her sisters weren't really her sisters, and her brother was not her full brother. After 25 years of attempting to live a "normal American life," her parents revealed a shocking family secret that would draw them all back to Cambodia, the home they fled and struggled to forget during the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979. As she packs for her trip back to Cambodia, Socheata turns to the camera and confides, "I knew more about the Holocaust than the Khmer Rouge. I knew even less about my own family."



[Socheata Poeuv documents the unfurling of her family mystery in a beautiful, strong film called *New Year Baby*.](#) After arriving in Cambodia, Socheata narrates the film through a series of interviews with her parents, relatives, and even the former Khmer Rouge leader who supervised the labor camp where her parents were forced to work. In one exchange that filled me with both dread and loathing, Socheata asks the former KR district manager, now a poor farmer, if the thousands of dead weigh upon him. Chillingly, he explains, "No. They do not come to conscience," and "I have forgotten so much." Shocked, Socheata presses him for more but the only thing he has left to say is, "I am sorry for the mismanagement of my district." He shifts on the dirt floor as his wife fries some fish for Socheata's mournful, exhausted Pa.

Ma and Pa Poeuv emerge as heroes by the end of the film. Ma's compassion for orphaned children and Pa's courage as he leads his family through minefields, gunfire, and across borders are stories that Socheata calls "remarkable, but common." When you watch the film, you'll find yourself marveling at how simple, ordinary people can be fiercely courageous, unconditionally loving, and self-sacrificial — and you'll wonder about your own capacity to "go and do likewise."

For Socheata, what had started as a "glorified home video" turned into a 90-minute film, which in turn led to a significant human rights effort to document and archive testimony of what it was like to live under a regime some call "the most controlling government in history." Socheata's latest project is Khmer Legacies, a nonprofit whose goal is to videotape testimonies of thousands of Cambodian survivors by having children interview their parents. Socheata knows firsthand the importance of storytelling through the generations: After *New Year Baby* was screened at a film festival in Dallas, Texas, Socheata brought her parents and entire extended family up to the stage. Upon seeing the 300+ audience give Ma and Pa Poeuv a standing ovation and wait in line to shake their hands,

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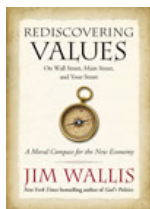
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Socheata recalls, "It really was that experience of having the audience affirm their story that transformed their relationship to their past. More than anything, they had never been honored like that before in their whole life. These are broken-English immigrant people who are invisible in our society." Socheata's film and new nonprofit shed some light and heart on the Cambodian genocide and the importance of "Never Again."

Curious about the family secret? [Tune in this Tuesday, May 27, for the national premiere of New Year Baby on PBS. Here's a preview:](#)



Anna Almendral is the marketing and circulation assistant for Sojourners. To learn more about Khmer Legacies, visit their Web site: www.khmerlegacies.org

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 **I and I** 2 years ago


Thank you, Anna. This is very moving. I look forward to watching the PBS show. Sometimes we really need to get inside peoples' stories to remember why it is we stand for peace and justice.

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 **carl copas** 2 years ago

Anna, thank you for calling our attention to this story.

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 **Joanna Bryden** 2 years ago

I saw this film at a refugee film festival in Cambodia last year. It was extremely moving, beautifully done, and even funny at many moments throughout the film. Anna, do you know of anywhere that we can buy this film on DVD or plans for its release?

[Flag](#)

 **Anna** 2 years ago

You can buy the DVD at newyearbaby.net.

Enjoy!

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 **Ms. Cynthia** 2 years ago

I just saw this last night.

I was also impressed with the art work and animation.

There's nothing like a good mystery to drive the curiosity to look for the truth.

They should have known that this was going to be a child of inquiry.

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 **Jenette** 2 years ago

I was very moved by the film.

The daughter was so respectful and her film beautiful.

The mother and father were very heroic, "you'll find yourself marveling at how simple, ordinary people can be fiercely courageous, unconditionally loving, and self-sacrificial -- and you'll wonder about your own capacity to "go and do likewise."- so true.

Just so that some of you can understand a simple, unsophisticated christian (me) who is somewhat impressed and bemused by this blog, The Red Letter Christians Website, and also Sojourner's website:

It is the very existence of such heroism (each person taking irresponsibility on themselves for good) and the horror of a Khmer Rouge regime (taking too much power/responsibility to control society) that makes me see small government more favorable than perhaps others do.

As a family, we, with others in our community and church, joined together with a wider community reach out to the poor (in this and other countries) with our money and time. We do this this voluntarily. I tremble at a government which would take all of the corporate power in the United States and bend it to what it perceives (at any given time) as the "good" of the people and nation.

Good governance requires a balance of the power of the citizens and the government. That is a complicated thing, no? You could tell that the elderly Khmer Rouge District Manager believed at the time that the government wielded all of that power for the "good of the society".

I leave it to God. I am trying to take what is good criticism from you all (iron sharpens iron), and

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discern what is misguided, self-righteous, or manipulative (surely those are the playground of the "Religious Right" according to the tone of the Red Letter Christians). I know these are complex matters. Maybe I am not up to them.

I can continue to take care of my husband, children, family, friends, and strangers (here and abroad) without the rhetoric that that pours forth from both sides of the political spectrum. I think I'll go read my Bible (yes, including the red letters...oh, yeah, my Bible has them all in black).

Thanks, for this good article. I hope many people watch the documentary. My comments here have more to do with hours worth of reading the Red Letter Christian website and Sojourners website than simply this blog. We are all growing and hopefully becoming more like the image of Christ, and your thoughts are appreciated and well-written.

In Christ, Jenette.

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