

synopsis

Loung Ung belongs to a family of nine. Her father, Sem Im Ung, is an official in the government of Lon Nol, a government soon to be displaced by the Khmer Rouge, a guerrilla force of communist revolutionaries intent on reforming Cambodian society. Her mother, Ay Choung Ung, and her six brothers and sisters make up Loung's family.

The book is a unique personal dossier of what happened to her family during the five years of Khmer Rouge occupation of the country between 1975 and 1980. While the first chapter presents a portrait of Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, as colourful and busy in ordinary times, and the second introduces us to Loung's family, the sense of danger is not far away. The first six chapters are all set in April 1975 – indicative of the speed with which the family had to flee the city and find refuge from persecution.

Loung is five years old at the time of the Khmer Rouge occupation of the country and takeover of the capital. She relates for us, through the child's eyes, her wonderment and incomprehension of what is happening around her. As she ages – she is ten in 1980 – her perceptions change. She gradually appreciates the gravity of conditions around her, becoming hardened as she struggles for survival, as did all the others around her.

The book takes the reader on a journey of flight from the Khmer Rouge, to safety wherever the family can find it in villages in the countryside. During the five years of living in villages, camps and enduring hard labour, physical distress, hunger and misery, the narrator describes the brutality of people's treatment at the hands of a military force intent on blindly enforcing the doctrinaire values of the incoming communist government. The horrors of the three and a half years of Pol Pot's regime are graphically documented while Loung's family struggles to survive. From a family of nine, only five survive the war.